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HER FACE OR HER FORTUNE?

ANNIE EDWARDES.

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J E T :

HER FACE OR HER FORTUNE ?

BY

ANNIE EDWARDES,

AUTHOR OF "ARCHIE LOVELL," "A BLUE-STOCKING," ETC.



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JET: HER FACE OR HER FORTUNE?

ERRATA.

Page 7, last line, *for "letter" read "letters."*

" 15, line 6, *for "sack-coloured" read "sad-coloured."*

" 23, line 17, *for "non-charitableness" read "uncharitableness"*

" 47, line 5, *for "smooth" read "smart."*

Vanquished and Victor. It needs no second glance to discern the relative positions in which Mr. Mark Austen and Miss Jet Conyngham stand towards each other.

By this time to-morrow morning papa and I will be in Paris. Paris!" she repeats, her face, her buoyant figure dancing a sort of accompaniment to that magic word. "Will you not envy us, Mr. Austen, as you travel back alone to the damp delights of Devonshire? I have forty sovereigns in my purse to spend as I choose; Cora gave them to me, good, generous little Cora—as a parting gift. Fancy, forty sovereigns, *a fortune*, to do as one likes with in Paris! I am not sure whether I shall spend it all the first day or not. I am afraid, if I once get into a milliner's shop, there will be nothing left for jewellery, and I do so love rings—do not you?"

Surely here is an occasion for an aspirant lover to say something leading, significant, and yet not too absurd, if he only possess the gift of flowery speech. Mark Austen plucks up heart of grace, and makes the attempt.

"A pretty hand, to my thinking, wants no adornment, Miss Conyngham, unless indeed it be——"

"I beg your pardon?"

"A single, very plain ring, upon the left third finger."

"Do you mean a wedding-ring?"

"I do."

"What a solemn voice—'I do.' Any one would think you were pronouncing the clinching words of the fatal ceremony itself."

"I wish I were," says Mark, looking with sudden and passionate meaning into the young girl's eyes.

No answering expression meets him; no faintest dawning of a blush crosses her bright, frank face.

"Poor creature, how I pity you! But Cora and I have often said"

"Do not hesitate out of false consideration for my feelings. You and your sister have said——"

Jet shakes her head and looks pitying.

"It is your misfortune, of course, not

"...is influenza, one must accept her as a kind of authority—takes you, suddenly, like measles or influenza, and—"

"Influenza," repeats a voice from the neighbourhood of the fire—a plaintive, muffled voice, suggestive of the chronic invalid. "If Mr. Austen has any fears of the malady, my dear, I believe I have a prescription in my dressing-case—I got it from Bottura in Rome—that might be of service to him."

"Oh, but Mr. Austen's complaint is not influenza, papa," cries Jet maliciously. "It resembles that disease, chiefly, I believe, in the suddenness of the attacks, but it is nothing serious."

"Everything is serious, child. You should not speak with such levity about illness. Every kind of sudden seizure connected with the breathing apparatus must be serious, above all to a person of Mr. Austen's florid temperament."

And rising from the easy-chair in which,

muffled about with furs and comforters, he has been reposing, Jet's father approaches the fire and stretches forth first one white hand, and then the other, to its blazing warmth.

Jet's father. It requires no formal introduction to acquaint you of the relationship between the two. The likeness is living: although the girl's animated features bloom with the perfect health of nineteen, and Mr. Conyngham's wear the waxen hue that thirty years of chronic valetudinarianism have engendered.

Valetudinarianism, not actual ill-health. During these thirty years that have brought him from delicate youth to the confines of fragile old age, Frederick Conyngham has probably not once been gravely ill. At five and twenty, the doctors, wrongly or rightly, affirmed one of his lungs to be touched. From that day until the present he has honestly believed himself to be dying, and has framed his manner of existence, his views of human responsibility, in accordance with his belief.

he has taken kindly to the inevitable ; has found, in symptoms, temperature, diet, and doctors, the congenial excitement, the labour physicking pain yielded to robuster natures by the field, the forum, or the stock exchange.

He has seen his valid fellow-creatures fall around him like leaves in November, two youthful wives of his own among the number ; has made more wills, codicils, and pathetic "last memoranda" than he can recall ; has watched whole systems of medicine, or of quackery, rise, flourish, fall ; and still he lives, and is no worse ! Nay, to such perfection has Frederick Conyngham brought this difficult art of living, that his death, with increasing years, seems, even to the doctors themselves, an ever remoter contingency.

Upon the first of each October he prepares to quit whatever English hotel he may chance, at the moment, to inhabit. For in

summer, as in winter, Mr. Conyngham possesses no fixed home. (A man hovering between two worlds, he will tell you, should have as few earthly possessions to set in order as possible.) About the 8th he crosses the channel, spends three weeks, never a day more or less, in Paris, and by November is in the south.

On this October evening when my story opens, his younger daughter, Jet, is, by accident extraordinary, his travelling companion.

“Sickness is a selfish rascal, we know,” Mr. Conyngham is wont to explain. “Still, I have not become so typical an invalid, I have not let suffering so blunt my sense of duty as to condemn my young and blooming girls to live the lives of nurses.” This, perhaps, when Cora and Jet would be sighing through the winter dreariness of an English country village, groaning under the discipline of the maiden aunt who has them in charge, and looking forward, as to glimpses of a better world, to their father’s rare letter from Italy or the south

the season of hope and health while they may."

During the present autumn, however, Mr. Conyngham has sustained a loss, possibly the most irreparable one that has ever come within the limits of his experience. Paolo, after five and twenty years of valetship, has been fallen in love with and married by the widow of a Scarborough hotel-keeper! Fallen in love with just at a season of the year when such a catastrophe must needs be most disastrous—winter plans scarcely matured, not a preparation for the long journey south completed. Who should replace him?

At no valet, hired through a London agency, would Frederick Conyngham look. These Italian fellows must be taken young, he theorises, must come of a stock one knows, if they are to be worth their salt. Fate, however, has willed that Paolo should

have a nephew at Turin, a young Perugino, eager to enter the service of the English milor upon the same conditions that have brought his uncle to affluence. If it were possible to exist, with only a daughter to wait on one, until such time as Paolo's nephew could be telegraphed for?

After long and painful deliberation, the invalid has decided to leave England with Jet for his sole travelling companion. His elder daughter, who remains on a visit in Devonshire, is to follow a month later, with her maid. Paolo's nephew will meet the travellers a few days hence, in Paris. In the mean time

"It is a most nervous position," proceeds Mr. Conyngham, with increased depression of voice, "a really harassing responsibility, I can assure you, Mr. Austen, to find myself travelling alone with a child so unaccustomed to sickness as Jet."

"Child!" repeats Miss Conyngham, stretching up her slight figure to its full height. "Wait until you see me tried, papa. Even Aunt Gwendoline, who is not

smile ! I shall be twenty next September—as far as age goes, I ought to have sense, if I am ever to have any, in my head."

"I—I am only afraid you have got too much sense," remarks young Austen, very low. "If I could see a few more symptoms of 'divine folly,' Miss Conyngham, I should have better grounds for hope——"

"Hope—about what?" Jet asks him brusquely. "Your examination papers? The chance Government will have, next week, of securing a new controller for the Indian forests? I thought you were so overwhelmingly clever that there was no doubt about your passing."

"Examination papers! Well, as other more important things may depend upon my getting through, I suppose I am anxious about them," he begins, this time with a really successful infusion of sentiment into his tone.

"Now, Brand's Essence of Beef Tea,"

interrupts Mr. Conyngham in his gloomiest voice, and laying his hand as he speaks upon the bell. "Are you quite certain you know which bag Brand is in?"

"I believe——" Jet is beginning, somewhat hesitatingly.

"Belief is not enough, child," says Mr. Conyngham, shaking his head. "Many a valuable life is lost through this kind of uncertainty. We had better order lights, and look things over by the list. When I had my poor Paolo, I could feel sure, of course, that all *human means* were at hand; Brand's essence, concentrated milk, cognac—every restorative needful in the event of sudden prostration, together. But now—"

A waiter enters before long with lights, and the invalid orders tea, giving minutest instructions as to its mode of infusion, with detailed directions as to the thickness and preparation of dry toast.

"You will stop and drink a cup of tea with us, Mr. Austen?—that is to say, if you have dined. I would invite no delicate person to commit the suicidal enormity—

"Yes, do stop, Mr. Austen," pleads Jet. "You have not dined, I know." This in mocking *sotto-voce*. "But never mind. In your critical state of health, a slice of thin toast and a cup of tea will be wholesomer for you than heavy food. Yes, Mr. Austen will stop, papa, and just while they are bringing in the tea-things I should like you to look over the travelling list. Although we have lost Paolo, I believe you will find everything possible or impossible for us to want on our journey in its proper place."

She dances across the room, poor Austen, his heart torn by a hundred conflicting emotions, jealously watching her smallest movement, and Mr. Conyngham produces his list. It is written out in finest copperplate, written with the methodical precision that characterises every arrangement of Frederick Conyngham's orderly, self-absorbed life.

“‘ No. 1. Mr. Conyngham’s dressing-case.’”

The travelling bags stand ready for his inspection on a side table; four neat leather bags, each with its appropriate number and label.

“‘ No. 2. Miss Conyngham’s dressing-case.’ ‘No. 3. Restoratives.’ Brand of course should be there.”

Jet searches and finds that Brand *is* there. Brand, condensed milk, cognac; every “human means,” labelled by Mr. Conyngham’s own hand, and in its fitting compartment.

“This,” goes on the invalid, “brings us to ‘No. 4. Spirit etna, medicine-glass, etcetera.’ I trust, my dear, the blue spectacles are in this bag?”

“Here they are, papa, two pairs with wire sides. Surely you do not mean to wear two pairs of spectacles at once?”

“I mean one pair for you, Jet. The glare and dust after Lyons——”

“Papa,” cries the girl, “at this I strike! I will drink cognac if you like, or condensed

ago, you know, you suggested a respirator and a dust cloak. Think what I shall come to in time ! Mr. Austen," as that lovelorn youth, his gaze still fixed upon her, crosses the room, "I invite you to pay us a visit as soon as we are settled at Esterel. You will find me in a respirator, a pair of blue spectacles with wire sides, and a dust cloak. Can you withstand the temptation ? "





CHAPTER II.

ONLY A LAND SURVEYOR.

JO laugh at “poor Mark Austen” has, during the last twelve months, been Jet’s diversion, her refreshment; the one bit of genuine comedy enlivening Aunt Gwendoline’s starched rule and the general sack-coloured background of country village life.

Let no man cherish sanguine hopes when the object of his choice has once grown to look upon him in the light of the ridiculous, or to speak of him habitually as “poor.” A crime or two on a large and picturesque scale would be disqualification less fatal to her favour.

That "only a land surveyor" has, probably, been the proverbial last straw.

Upon elder sons Jet Conyngham has been taught to look with the orthodox reverence of every well-nurtured English girl. Officers, in either service, she fully appreciates (having been to four Exeter assembly balls) at their fullest dancing value. Of curates, even, at village bazaars, penny readings, lawn-tennis parties, or the like, she is tolerant; on one memorable occasion was more flattered than she cared to acknowledge when the youthful assistant of the parish doctor saved up his stipend to send her a guinea valentine.

But a land surveyor!

It is one of those dreadful outside businesses, like a dentist's, or a pianoforte-tuner's, that place a man nowhere. These, reader, are Miss Jet Conyngham's views, not mine. More brains required than for the army? Possibly. You do not see

brains. And you do see a brass plate. And all people of that kind have brass plates on their doors—"Mr. Thomson, Land Surveyor;" "Mr. Johnson, Auctioneer." Doubtful, if one were forced to choose, whether the auctioneer be not the least objectionable of the two.

What shall ability, independence of character, high principle, avail a man in the face of opinions like these?

Did Jet suspect the reality of Mark Austen's passion for herself, it might be different. In her blithe young heart is room and to spare for malice, of a certain stingless, evanescent nature. Of coquetry she has not a grain. Let Mark declare himself and she would refuse him, with point-blank unfaltering decision—no doubt about that. I scarcely think she would turn him into ridicule afterwards. As the next half-hour is destined, however, to bring this matter from speculation to certainty, I may return, without further retrogression, to my story.

"Austen, let me attempt to recollect."

Austen, do you spell your name with an *e* or an *i*? I rather think I may have come across some of your family in the south."

Young Mark replies that his name is spelt with an *e*. As regards Mr. Conyngham's having met his people abroad, nothing is likelier. His father died at Florence five years ago. His mother habitually, and from taste, lives out of England; a quick flush passing over the lad's face as he volunteers the admission.

"Ah, my memory has become so uncertain that I can never venture on a statement without referring to my name-book. Here it is, you see."

Mr. Conyngham draws from his breast-pocket a thin duodecimo volume, upon the back of which the word "surnames" is embossed in gold letters.

"In my wretched health, Mr. Austen, and making scores of new acquaintance—with or without my will—every winter, I

am only enabled to recollect names at all through alphabetical classification. In this little book is a list of the English persons I have met during the past ten years ; with a few words or abbreviations, just sufficient to recall the circumstances of our introduction, added to each."

Jet laughs aloud.

" It would not take a very big book to contain an alphabetical list of my friends. A—Austen ; B—I do not know any B's ; C—Conyngham. How dreadfully few people Cora and I seem to know in the world, papa."

" When you are a few years older, you will not speak of seclusion as ' dreadful,' my dear Jet." Mr. Conyngham has never voluntarily endured a week of his own society since he can remember. " The number of new faces I have been forced perpetually to connect with new names has, for years, been a standing nightmare to me —for my poor Paolo never mastered sufficient English to be of the slightest assistance in such matters. Austen, with an *e*, I

"Ah, here we have it: 'Sir George and Lady Austen, Naples, 1865.' Could those have been——"

"Those were my father and mother," says Mark shortly. "I recollect they were living at Naples, when I was a small boy at Rugby. I went down there once for my holidays."

This with an italicising of the word "once," which Jet, some day, may look back upon and understand.

"'Sir George in ill-health,' " Mr. Conyng-ham goes on to read. "'Staying at the Hotel Farnese. A Mr. Biron of the party!'"

"'A Mr. Biron of the party!'" repeats Mark Austen, mechanically.

"Then we have our next meeting, I leave a space—thus, you see, in the event of coming across the same people again. 'Sir George and Lady Austen, Hôtel des Trois Reines, Upper Engadine. Sir George

greatly broken. The Reverend Mr. Biron with them.' Can that be an error of the pen, do you suppose—the *Reverend Laurence Biron?*"

"No error at all," answers Mark Austen, almost with a groan of impatience. "You have every detail most correctly, sir."

"Oh, as to details—I cannot pretend to enter upon them," says Mr. Conyngham, deprecatingly. "I add a word or two, beneath the name and date, and trust to such wretched memory as I possess for the rest. There is yet another entry, I perceive; quite a recent one: 'Hôtel Cavour, Florence. Lady Austen, patroness of a fancy ball.' (This of course is since your father's death.) 'Kept awake till three in the morning by the fiddlers.' Your mother, I imagine, must have been staying in the same hotel with myself. 'Mem. the Rev. Laurence Biron.'"

"The Reverend Laurence Biron appears to be the burden of the song," observes Jet, conscious by instinct that she is saying something to ruffle young Mark's temper.

справилъ въ ваша.

Mark Austen turns his eyes full upon her. He has handsome, outspoken eyes : indeed, his whole boyish face is handsome, although Miss Jet Conyngham may not choose to think so.

“The Reverend Laurence Biron is so little of a reverend that I have never remembered to ask myself the nature of his clerical duties. Altogether,” says Mark, “I suppose I have been in his society four times during my life. Twice when I was a schoolboy ; again,” a curious inflection changing his voice, “at my father’s funeral, and—once since ! It is probable that you know Mr. Biron’s history much better than I do, sir ? ” he adds, turning to Mr. Conyngham, with more nervousness of manner than the subject would seem to warrant.

“I know no one’s history well,” says Mr. Conyngham, with melancholy promptness. “I have neither strength nor spirits for the cultivation of such interests. From the

entries in my name-book, I appear to have met this gentleman frequently, each time, it would seem, Mr. Austen, in the society of members of your family. There my knowledge of him ends. I do not imagine I should know Mr. Laurence Biron by sight were I to meet him in the street."

And a really noteworthy side of Frederick Conyngham's character is laid bare in the admission. Living, winter after winter, in the most condensed atmosphere of gossip—I refrain from using a stronger word—passing long months with the same set of people, in one or other of the large invalid hotels along the Riviera; seeing every kind of social drama, every variety of love, hatred, friendship, non-charitableness, played out under his very eyes, he continues insensible to it all. The names of his acquaintance he enters in his book. Their physical ailments, real or fancied, may, from his general sympathy with medical subjects, linger in his memory. Here his interest in his fellow-creatures ends. You might sit next him at dinner and breakfast through half a winter

to you, much as weaging an ill-owing woman,
curing an obnoxious draught, or the like,
you would fail to impress your personality
upon his mind.

"Mr. Laurence Biron I should certainly
not remember were I to meet him in the
street. My impressions of Lady Austen are
more vivid. You do not resemble your
mother, I think, Mr. Austen?"

"Not the very least in the world, I am
told, sir," is Mark's quick answer.

"Ah. C'était Monsieur son père qui
n'était pas si bien," murmurs Jet, under her
breath.

Happily, the impertinence is lost. Mr.
Conyngham has risen from the table, and
is again gazing despondently at the arrange-
ment of the travelling bags. Mark Austen
is too thoroughly engrossed in his own not
over-cheerful reflections to catch the drift
of Miss Conyngham's whisper.

"I—I suppose I ought to be going," he
remarks, feeling blankly in his heart that

with those last ten minutes of twilight beside the window went his last chance of declaring himself. On the transparent pretext of looking up a school-friend at Folkestone, he has accompanied Jet and her father thus far upon their journey (money for railway tickets, alas ! a consideration to him), and has won—just a little more ridicule than usual for his pains. “ You have preparations still to make, Miss Conyngham, and will be glad to get me out of the way.”

“ Out of the way ? ” repeats Jet coolly. “ On the contrary, I think you would do well to stop and be of use, if your friend can spare you.”

“ Oh, my friend—— ”

“ Is of the Mrs. Harris type—hypothetical. So much the better. With all the will in the world, I am not Paolo, and we have eleven large cases, besides these few little parcels and handbags, to look after. Papa, do you hear ? Mr. Austen, at a sacrifice of most valuable time, is kindly going to see us on board ; so you can lie down and sleep for just one hour and five minutes. You

bility in our own hands."

Mr. Conyngham shakes his head, pathetically.

"I *never* sleep when I am travelling, my dear—it would be scarcely an exaggeration to say that I never sleep at any time—but I can go through the form of lying down. It is a duty to endeavour to husband strength while we can."

And muffling his furred cloak around him, the invalid lies passively down on a sofa, closes his eyes, and in a few minutes' time, as far as a man's state can be judged of by others than himself, is in the land of dreams.

"Poor papa! This is his last chance of rest until we reach Paris," says Jet in a whisper. "If you can stand the *frightful* slowness of a tête-à-tête, Mr. Austen, I propose that we take ourselves and the lights into the next room. The bags can be locked and the hotel bill paid in five minutes. That will give papa a good hour's sleep."



And Mark Austen an hour's undisturbed talk with the object of his adoration.

Who shall say his gods have not been propitious to him at last ?

They move across the room, Jet, on tip-toe, bearing the candles, young Austen, with the sensations of a man about to head a forlorn hope, following. They open a door that leads into a small adjoining sitting-room, close it noiselessly behind them—and are alone.

"If we had only a pack of cards," says Jet, seating herself beside a table, and looking bored by anticipation—"if we had only a pack of cards, we might enliven these terrible sixty minutes with a game of écarté. Or do you understand fortune-telling ? Cora has a genius for it. Long before papa decided on taking me, Cora foretold how I should 'meet my fate'—tall, dark, mysterious (of course with the usual drawback of the malignant fair woman), in the south. Do you understand fortune-telling, Mr. Austen ? "

CHAPTER III.

“I PITY THE PEERESS.”

HE draws up a chair to about three feet distant from her and begins; yes, on my word, as a faithful narrator, *begins*; without one syllable of introduction, one note of warning—just, with a girl as keenly alive to the ridiculous as Jet Conyngham, the very worst policy open for him to adopt. Young Mark, however, is far too agitated, far too deeply, too passionately enamoured, to think of weighing his impulses in the balance of prudence.

“This is the last time I shall be likely to see you for a great many months, Miss Conyngham.”

“Are you going to tell my fortune?” she interrupts, with a half-suppressed yawn. “Some people read the book of fate by palmistry—these lines you see, that intersect each other like a capital W.”

Holding out her delicately cut, slightly sunburnt hand for his inspection. Mark seizes it between both his own—an unwise action enough—but the temptation, poor lad, is too strong for him.

“I have known you one year!” he exclaims, not pausing to decipher the meaning of her face. “By the time I had known you a week, as you yourself, as every one else, must have seen, it was all over with me.”

Jet, on this unexpected sally, allows her hand to remain tranquilly in his possession. She looks at him straight between the eyes, an ominous quiver the while hovering about the corners of her lips.

“‘By the time you had known me a week it was . . . all over with you!’ Before we go any further, Mr. Austen, before I even attempt to reply, will you tell me if

There is no mistaking the sound of his voice, the expression of his eyes. Jet draws away her hand, a little frightened, but still intensely curious as to what kind of demonstration is coming next.

"Please don't be tragic," she cries imploringly. "Whenever I see human life presented under high falutin aspects it makes me hysterical. I saw the finest actor in London, Mr.—I forget his name—act Charles the First, and when the poor king took leave of Henrietta Maria, and all the people round the theatre were searching for their handkerchiefs, I laughed. Aunt Gwendoline said my conduct was irreligious. I could not help it. These things are the result of temperament. If you were to be pathetic now I should be hysterical, and if I were hysterical I should wake papa, so please don't!"

Thus admonished, Mr. Mark Austen pro-

ceeds to urge his suit ; but upon a less exalted plane than that of tragedy. “ My worldly prospects,” he remarks gloomily, “ are, I suppose, about as uncertain as any fellow could have to offer.”

“ You see, you are in such a dreadful profession,” says Jet, with quiet pity. “ If your parents, as you have told me, wanted to put you in the army, why, in the world, did you oppose them ? In the army a man may be over head and ears in debt, wild, extravagant—anything you choose, and still (as long as he manages not to be cashiered) the position is that of a gentleman.”

“ Position ! I should prefer my own state of mind being that of a gentleman,” exclaims Mark. “ That, however, is not a point we need discuss. If I pass this examination, Miss Conyngham, as I have a fair chance of doing, I shall no longer be in the obnoxious profession of a land surveyor.”

“ Not exactly. At all events ‘ Indian Forests,’ anything in the service, has a better sound, has it not ? ”

“ I should have to learn my work for two

"I should be better able to support a wife in India than half the officers in the army."

"A wife!"

She brings the word out with a gasp; she sits looking at his flushed boyish face, his rumpled blonde hair, in simple, unaffected amazement. Then she begins to laugh, not "hysterically," not loud enough for the sound to reach Mr. Conyngham, but with a quiet heartiness, a sense of real, concentrated enjoyment, that under circumstances less poignant would do you good to hear.

"This is something I never expected." So, as soon as she can speak at all, she tells him. "Cora and I have often thought——"

"Go on, Miss Conyngham, I beg."

"That you might be in love—with Wilhelmina Thompson, or the eldest Miss Fairleigh, perhaps, as neither of them is in her first youth. But to hear you, Mark

Austen, talk of a wife ! Why, you are only a boy. You have just left school. I believe you never smoked a cigar, never wore a tail coat, before you came to Dulford. Now did you, on your honour ? "

For a minute Mark Austen does not speak.

A minute—sixty seconds ! It sounds nothing in writing ; 'tis a pretty long stretch of time, as Jet finds, when you have to support the ordeal of being looked at by a pair of such passionately earnest human eyes as look at her now.

" On your honour, Miss Conyngham, have you ever seriously thought, do you think at this instant, that I could be in love with any woman on the face of the earth but yourself ? "

The girl colours from temple to chin ; she turns away from him sharply.

In the course of the two years and a half during which she has been considered "out," the range of Jet Conyngham's personal experience in matters of sentiment has been considerable. There was the doctor's assistant (with his Valentine), of whom I have

cross, aged eighteen, at every lawn-tennis party and archery meeting of the past summer, and there have been two hopeless curates.

To the passion of love she has never come nearer than in the pages of a three-volume novel, and its outward and visible demonstrations, as shown on Mark Austen's miserable face, affect her most unpleasantly.

“I declare, on my solemn honour, I never suspected you of such folly. In love . . . with me! What have I done, I of all people, that you should dare tell me such horrible things?”

A look of positive repulsion is on her face. She draws herself as far away from him as it is possible for her to do, without actually quitting her chair.

Mark Austen’s fiery temper rises.

“You are assuming a tone that the occasion does not warrant,” he exclaims, hotly. “A man, even a land surveyor, does

not offer an affront to a girl when he tells her that he loves her. In asking you to be my wife—yes, Miss Conyngham, I repeat the obnoxious words, *my wife*, I pay you as high a compliment as I could pay any peeress in England.”

“Do you? I am sorry for the peeress. I—I had always thought,” cries Jet with indignation, “that a man of delicacy, of self-respect, would wait until he received some slight encouragement before putting people in such a wounding position. I——”

“Oh, you have never given me the slightest encouragement, I know,” he interrupts her bitterly. “I have myself, and myself alone, to thank for everything. I am a fool.”

And Mark Austen buries his face between his hands.

Jet feels an awful presentiment that he is going to cry.

If it were not for disturbing her father she would take sure and instant refuge in flight. But flight is barred to her. The room has no egress save through the larger

Austen, listening to whatever recriminations, worse still, to whatever sentimental madness, it may be his will to utter.

Perhaps this is the way girls are entrapped into plighting their faith ; this the sort of coercion that brings about the myriad unhappy marriages one sees around one in the world ! Jet Conyngham feels that if Mark were to show symptoms of tears she would say "yes" on the spot—although how far she might hold herself bound by the letter of the promise, afterwards, would be another question.

But Mark, at no time of a lachrymose temperament, was never farther from shedding tears than at this moment.

" You say that you have never given me encouragement," he exclaims, abruptly looking up at her. " In a certain restricted sense, I allow that you have not. Women, no doubt, act according to their own code of honour in these matters."

Away flies every spark of pity out of Jet's breast, her eyes kindle, her cheeks flush.

"Well, this, indeed, is an experience I had not looked for. You begin talking abject nonsense to me——"

"Nonsense!"

"Oh, if that does not please you, sir, you make me, Jet Conyngham an offer!" It seems as though the word would choke her. "Then, because I refuse to listen to you, you sneer about 'honour.' I have as fine a sense of honour as your own. I despise girls who pride themselves on their conquests, or who like to see a man make a fool of himself. I have seen the sight *once!* I see it at this moment," says Jet, cruelly, "and I hope to Heaven never to look upon the like again, during the remainder of my life."

Mark starts up, he stands with folded arms, with whitening lips, confronting her.

"If we lived under the same roof for twenty years, you need not be afraid. I——"

"May I ask of you to speak lower,

FwF...

"And when I look back to all that is past! When I think how I have given you credit for frankness, for kindness!"

"You have given me credit justly," she cries, with a firm lip, and returning him glance for glance. "From the day you came to Dulford, from the first Sunday I saw you, crushed in, hot and miserable, between Wilhelmina Thompson and her papa, I liked you, though I could not resist the pleasure of teasing you, sometimes. If I had had a brother, I would not have minded his being cut on your pattern. . . . I thought you were unhappy, that something in your position or your prospects disheartened you, and I tried my best to treat you kindly. . . ."

"To treat me kindly!" echoes poor young Mark.

"You know it, as well as I do. At lawn-tennis, to take only one instance, have I, or have I not, always managed to get you on my side?"

"Unless little Lord Starcross happened to fill the place of honour before me! Possibly you did not think me a bad player?" suggests Mark, grimly.

"At Easter, did I not use all my influence to get you into the choir, just because I knew the practisings amused you?"

"You wanted a tenor, Miss Conyngham, you were sincere enough to tell me so. The anthem would have fallen through without one. Gibbs the carpenter was ill with pleurisy, so you selected Mark Austen—taking care to let him know that his voice was not equal to Gibbs's—as a substitute."

"And then at the tea-parties! Have I not always banked with you when we played Van John? Yes, and in the face of the whole world, with the terrible eyes of Aunt Gwendoline full upon me, have even proposed that we should be partners when you were too shy to come forward yourself."

"My unsuccessful rivals being married men of sixty, or small boys in jackets! Yes, Miss Conyngham, you have generally been good enough to bank with me at Van John."

' the eyes. "My, my now we was
archery ball, at the dances——"

But here some contradictory recollection would seem to have dawned on Jet's mind. Her eyes sink; the words die stammeringly on her lips.

"The last archery ball!" repeats Mark Austen, reddening. "I think you might have had the good feeling not to revert to the last archery ball. Pray, Miss Conyngham, did I, on that occasion, receive evidence of your kindness, your friendship for me?"

"I danced with you three—four times running," she replies; but still in faltering tones, still with her eyes downcast.

"At the beginning of the evening, before any one 'belonging to the service' had arrived from Exeter, I know that you did. If I mistake not, you also permitted me to write my name down on your card for the cotillon?"

He looks tragic enough now, in all con-

science; but Jet's eyes are busily scrutinising the faded hotel carpet, not his face.

“And if, after eighteen dances, I was unlucky enough to get confused over my card, was it my fault?” she asks him. “I am sure the names were so rubbed out, it is a wonder I did not make more mistakes, I—I—”

“You threw me over, calmly, coolly, deliberately. Do not be at the trouble of defending yourself. The same elastic code we were speaking of is, I dare say, not too severe on the score of truth-telling.”

“Well, and if I did throw you over—and *I know I did*—the temptation was great,” cries Jet, with rising spirit. “I danced the cotillon with the handsomest man, the best waltzer, in the room, the colonel of the regiment——”

“—— the colonel of the regiment!” exclaims Mark, goaded to desperation.

Miss Jet Conyngham rises. She makes her discarded lover a curtsey, formal and lengthy, as ladies, half a century ago, used to make their partners at the conclusion of the minuet.

you for your graceful epithets, Mr. Austen, in the colonel's name and in my own. After this, if you please, we will be silent. I am forced, for my papa's sake, to remain a little longer in your company. Your violent language, sir, your cursing and your swearing, no duty compels me to endure."

And having thus spoken, her slight figure as upright as a judge's wand, Jet walks across to one of the windows and takes up her position there ; a half-smile of conscious superiority, of elevation, at all events, above the very low and commonplace sins of a Mr. Mark Austen, round her lips.

Mark seats himself, with an air that he would fain hope is one of indifference, at a table ; seizes the solitary book within reach —a History, sixty years old, of the Rural Parishes of Sussex—opens it at hazard, and, with lurid red lights dancing between his vision and the page, begins to read a

chapter “On the Fisheries of Brighthelmstone,” upside down.

Thus they remain; never uttering a sound, never looking in the direction of each other’s faces, until the different church clocks of Folkestone ring a discordant eleven. Then Jet Conyngham, with airy, self-composed tread, recrosses the room.

Mark Austen rises; he holds open the door, polite, cold, stately, for her to pass out.

“If it inconveniences you in the very least to see poor papa on board the steamer, pray do not come, Mr. Austen. Pray do not consider that you are in any way bound by your promise to render us assistance.”

So she tells him, in a set, formal little manner, as though she were repeating a lesson learnt by heart.

“And why should I not see Mr. Conyngham on board the steamer?” returns Mark, with studied coolness. “What action has Mr. Conyngham committed that I should treat him with courtesy?”

after seeing her father comfortably packed away, his bags and restoratives around him, in the cabin, Jet runs up on deck to take a parting look at English shores—and finds herself once more standing at Mark Austen's side.

"I . . . I thought you were gone, ages ago," she exclaims, startled out of all her resolutions of reserve. And indeed the last bell has rung, the last "Any one for the shore?" been lustily vociferated by the sailor who guards the gangway. "Surely, Mr. Austen, you do not mean to cross over to Boulogne with us?"

"Heaven forbid!" says Mark Austen.

Solemn, tragic, is the young fellow's voice; but, for once, tragedy does not move Jet Conyngham to laughter.

"I stopped here," he proceeds, "upon the chance of seeing you alone, of offering you an apology before you left."

"An apology! As if anything of the kind were needed!"

"It is greatly needed, Miss Conyngham. Can you bring yourself to forgive me for speaking to you as I did? My confounded temper got the better of me, and I behaved like a churl."

"It was more my fault than yours. I—I had no right to laugh at you," Jet confesses, a choking, most unwonted sensation making itself felt in the regions of her throat.

"It was not your fault at all, and you had every right to laugh," he interrupts her shortly. "Perhaps, at some future time . . . if ever you should be hard hit yourself, such things may happen, you know . . . you will come to understand that the jest was somewhat sorry earnest for me!"

And then, without a shake of the hand, without one more word of farewell greeting, he leaves her.

Five minutes later the steamer is at sea.

For the first time since she can remember Jet hears foreign voices around her; she sees the Folkestone harbour lights burn dimly through the mist. The old, dull,

her face round, hopefully, towards the unseen coast of France—towards the south.





CHAPTER IV.

A LILY—PAINTED !

AVIGNON—the sun shining, the mistral blowing. Could any other combination of words evoke the same images of dust and glare, of smooth blue sky and bitter, heart-searching cold ?

At the beginning of an English November, winter, the common foe, steals on you with muffled footsteps, envelops you in slow-gathering mists and fogs, occasionally slays and buries you, before you are well awake to his approach. Here, in the south, he springs at your throat with a bound !

Last week 'twas glowing summer; the grapes not all gathered from the yellowing

gress you can *see*, by the columns of dust and gravel across the plains. A wind that sets the collective doors and shutters of the whole city rattling like bird clappers; that causes the very oxen-drivers to wrap themselves, as they would against January snows, in their canvas cloaks; that makes every invalid in every hotel in Avignon realise the force of the old tristich, as they shiver, cough, grumble, in distressful harmony :

“Avignon venteuse;
Sans vent, empoisonneuse;
Avec vent, ennuieuse.”

Frederick Conyngham is too methodically wretched a man to grumble over-much. He secures the most comfortable armchair in the warmest chimney corner that the public salon of the Hôtel de l’Univers yields, and there, with Perugino at hand to minister to his needs, sits making entries in his different neat little note-books, and

drinking barley-water ; a slight, exceedingly slight, cold that Mr. Conyngham believes he may have taken during his journey from Paris rendering the consumption of this melancholy liquid necessary.

Beside one of the windows, an invalid guide-book in her hand, stands Jet, looking out with longing eyes at the keen blue of the sky, the sharp whiteness of the sunshine, and envying every living creature who walks, I might more justly say who is vehemently propelled, along the narrow street that leads from the Place Crillon into the courtyard of the hotel.

Never yet has there blown wind so cold—and she has experienced the zephyrs of nineteen English springs—that Jet Conyngham would not sooner have braved its inclemency than stay inactive within doors ; for the girl is hereditary restless, has a temperament adapted to any “doing” life, rather than to one of contemplation, or crewel work. But Mr. Conyngham keeps her fast prisoner to-day. Would she wear blue spectacles, a respirator, or a furred

the number of days on which the mistral prevails throughout the winter, and speculating as to whether existence will be more cheerful, looked at through the double windows of southern hotels, than she and Cora used to find it among the mud and mildness and freedom of the Devonshire lanes.

Only one other traveller shares possession of the salon with Mr. Conyngham and his daughter—an Englishman who came down in the same train with them from Paris yesterday, and who, at the present moment, is engaged in deciphering a letter at the centre table of the room—a letter bearing the Florence post-mark; ill-written, crossed; its import certainly not of love, scarcely, one would say, of friendship, if the bored, impatient expression of the reader's face speak true.

“Amico mio.”

By an ironical whim of fate it happens

that these four scrawled pages sound the keynote of Jet Conyngham's story. I must, therefore, impose upon the reader the same infliction that the lawful amico mio is undergoing.

" You do not deserve, bad creature, that I should write you two letters for one ! However, I really want a commission done in Avignon, and as I believe you will make that city the *pied-à-terre* of your voyage, I run the chance of addressing a few hurried lines to the Hôtel de l'Univers.

" Go to Mademoiselle Palmieri, Modiste (I forget the exact address, a milliner in a little street leading off the Rue Calade, it will not take you an hour to hunt her up), and get me one of those *sweet* black velvet coiffures worn by the Arles peasant girls. Palmieri, I fancy, keeps them made up ; if not, order one. You will probably stop a night or two in Avignon, or can do so for the sake of my head-dress. They are made of black velvet and lace, but I am not sure whether a flower should be *légèrement posée* above the ear or not. This you must see

ing to my toilette.

"All the gentlemen were telling me at the carnival ball last year how admirably the Arles head-dress would suit my *line of feature*, so I mean to have one by me for any occasion when I may want to look my best.

"Florence has been dull to desperation since I came down from Homburg, and I really look forward, *mon cher*, to your return. Until you come, I am without a cavalier, and unless I take horse exercise I always get back my attacks of *migraine*. Talking of *migraine*, I must tell you that I have gone definitely away from allopathic treatment. Jinkinson no doubt was a worthy man, and an old friend, but his ideas belonged to the past, and you know I am always for *New Lights* in everything. My present medical attendant is young Doctor Herzlieb, a homœopathist (to which science I am an ardent convert), and one of the

most fascinating and intellectual of creatures ; a mind quite above any small thought of gaining by his profession, and the most poetic profile ! But you will judge of him for yourself !

“ If you remain more than a week at Esterel, I shall, likelier than not, run up and join you there, so keep me *au fait* of your movements. Esterel reminds me I have had a letter from little Major Brett, who is making it his head-quarters. He tells me a piece of news that will be interesting to the heiress-seekers of the Riviera. Mr. Conyngham has taken rooms at the Hôtel Paradis for the winter (you must remember Frederick Conyngham ; we met him first in Naples—alas ! in happier days), and is to bring his daughter, a well-gilt octo-roon, with him. The mother was a West Indian heiress, and the girl will come into forty thousand pounds on the day she is twenty-three. There will be a chance for some unprincipled fortune-hunter, *mon cher*, eh ?

“ Miss Conyngham is not a beauty. Old Brett remembers seeing her at the theatre

on a girl with forty thousand charms, in the
Three per Cents ! You remember what Lord
Byron wrote—

“ ‘Shakespeare says ’tis silly
To gild refined gold or paint the lily.’

“ Depend upon it, Miss Conyngham will
find suitors, and to spare, in this country
of adventurers—thick lips and woolly hair
notwithstanding.

“ Vallance warns me that it is post time,
so I must bring my scribble to a close.
Unless you return to Florence quickly I
shall positively be forced to ride out with a
groom, which I detest.

“ *Toujours à toi,*

“ HELENA AUSTEN.

“ P.S. In case of a flower being worn, ask
Palmieri if ’tis most elegant above the right
ear or left ? Pack the coiffure in your hat-
box, to avoid *crushing*.

“ *A rivederla.*”

The Englishman reads this farrago through, from the first word to the last, impatience gradually merging into attention towards its close. Then he takes up a Galignani from the table close at hand; unfolds, lifts it, and peruses—the countenances of Mr. Conyngham and of Jet.

Jet, during the past two minutes, has abandoned her post beside the window. She stands at her father's side, inspecting with grave interest, a jug of barley-water freshly brought in by Perugino. Unobserved himself, the stranger can thus scan her face critically; compare its merits and its faults, item by item, with the description that he has received of them.

To start with, her complexion is of brilliant snow and rose-bloom; so much, he thinks, for the “dark blood unmistakable,” so much for women’s forecasts as to each other’s looks! Her hair, of too warm a bronze to come under the denomination light, waves back from her broad forehead in those large natural undulations which stand at the remote end of the pole from

and originality. Her mouth, perhaps, may be a little large, or would have been held so, in the days when keepsake beauties and Cupid's bows were the mode: the lips sensitive, chiselled, mobile, are of the purest Caucasian type—a type that precludes not merely the suspicion, but the possibility, of Creole blood.

And on the day she is twenty-three she will have forty thousand pounds.

Not one word of Galignani's two days' old news does the stranger follow. His senses are with his heart, and that is filled with golden speculations—golden yet hazardous. That the invalid sipping barley-water is Mr. Conyngham he feels assured. Few habitual travellers in the district of Riviera but know Frederick Conyngham by sight. The identity of "the girl with eager eyes and yellow hair" belongs still to the region of conjecture.

“If you only knew how I like cold winds, papa.”

Papa. Doubt in a moment has become assurance, to be quickly followed by faith, hope, I know not what other train of pleasurable emotions, in the stranger’s mind.

“Mistral cannot be worse than east wind, and at Dulford we always have that from February to June—yes, and go out in it every day of our lives.”

“You are not sufficiently protected against these climates, Jet; you know nothing about the pernicious effects of mistral or sunset. Now if, instead of buying so many new bonnets in Paris——”

“Hats, papa. I have never yet worn a bonnet, except to church.”

“——you had provided yourself with a sensible furred cloak like mine, it would be different.”

“But I have got a thick tweed jacket,” persists Jet. “If you will let me go out—only for half an hour—I promise to put on my tweed jacket.”

Mr. Conyngham sips his barley-water and

he be held an over-nervous parent: during Jet's nineteen years of life, he has probably not spent as many months in the girl's company. Wrapped in his furred cloak, he simply looks at existence through a pair of smoke-coloured spectacles, breathes the breath of life through a respirator, and feels it a kind of personal injury when the young and robust refuse to do the same.

"I see a baker's shop within a hundred yards of the hotel," remarks Jet presently. "And I do not think I ever felt so hungry before, and dinner will not be served for another three hours."

At this affecting appeal, or rather series of appeals, Mr. Conyngham shakes his head gravely.

"There is no worse habit than that of eating between meals," he remarks. "It is sufficient, in itself, to lay the foundation of almost every disorder. Hungry at three o'clock! And we had a tolerable, really very tolerable, breakfast at noon."

“As far as quality goes, the breakfast may have been unimpeachable,” says Jet, “but you must remember I am accustomed to solid English food. The most substantial thing I got out of the whole dozen dishes to-day was a cock-robin in a paper shirt.”

“Bécassines, my love, bécassines, and very fairly dressed, too, for a provincial inn.”

“But bécassines are not sustaining, papa. You must allow that. Now, if I could get a bun—I suppose they make buns in France? —or a roll, just to carry me on to dinner.”

“Take a little barley-water, my dear. It is surprising what nutritive qualities barley-water possesses. Let me desire Perugino to bring you a glass.”

“I thank you, papa; Aunt Gwendoline made me drink barley-water *once*, when I had whooping-cough. The recollection will be enough for the remainder of my life.”

Mr. Conyngham shuts his eyes, and leaning back in his chair, puts on an attitude of sleep. With Jet’s rejection of barley-water he evidently looks upon the subject

selfish considerations only. How if this matter of braving mistral and sunset could be shown to affect other interests than her own?

"We have no grapes for to-morrow, I have just remembered it! And Dr. Hammond expressly said you should not be without fresh fruit when you travel. How stupid I must have been not to think of the state of the commissariat sooner."

"Eh, how?" cries Mr. Conyngham, his faculties awakened on the instant. "No grapes? Oh, this will never do. Perugino! —I must trouble you, my dear Jet, to ring for Perugino at once."

"Perugino has gone out," says Jet, promptly. "Don't you remember? We sent him to the station to telegraph about a coupé. I saw Perugino pass down the street not three minutes ago."

"If I had my poor Paolo," murmurs Mr. Conyngham, sinking back. "These un-

happy, these culpable oversights never occurred in Paolo's time."

"But a fruit-market is quite close at hand," urges Jet. "I remember passing one last night on our way from the Gare. If you would only let me——"

"Put on your wraps, put on your warmest wraps and start," rejoins Mr. Conyngham, in an injured voice. "The wind has somewhat abated; half an hour's sharp walking may possibly do you good. And remember that the Coteau-Brûlé grapes—impress that name on your mind, 'raisin de Coteau-Brûlé'—are the best. If the skins show signs of dryness, so much the better, I know, on respectable medical authority, that the Coteau-Brûlé grapes are wholesomest after the process of shrivelling has set in."

Jet waits, as you may believe, for no second permission. Her eyes, her face, her whole figure illumined with thankfulness at being free (although the freedom shall last but the space of a single half-hour), she dances away like a flash of lightning across the polished floor of the salon; away

Avignon city.

Mr. Conyngham, sipping his barley-water, the stranger, meditating how he shall best renew his acquaintance with the father of forty thousand pounds—already Jet is pigeon-holed as “forty thousand pounds” in his thoughts—remain alone.

A baker’s shop and the fruit-market lie within a stone’s throw of the Hôtel de l’Univers.

“Tenez, ma petite demoiselle, tenez—le beau panier pour trente sous,” says the olive-cheeked, classic-featured dame de la halle as Jet stands waiting for her grapes. “Cinq livres de raisin, bon raisin de Coteau-Brûlé pour un rien !”

Can any one say it is a bad country to live in where the sun is hot enough to give you sunstroke in November, and you may buy five pounds of nectar-sweet grapes, with a basket to carry them in, for fifteenpence ?

Her marketing accomplished, Jet Conyngham pursues her way briskly along the Quai du Rhône, the fruit-basket slung upon her arm, a foot-long pistolet of sour bread in her hand. The blood stirs in her veins as no breeze in muggy Devonshire has ever stirred it. She feels it a subtle kind of excitement merely to breathe, feels as though a ten-mile walk before dinner would just serve to rest, not exhaust, the desire for quick movement, bright sunshine, cold and sparkling atmosphere, that is in her.

The mistral's blinding glare, the mistral's blinding dust, are miseries thrown away (like most of life's miseries) upon Jet. She has got one half-hour's freedom in which to explore the lions of Avignon—the broken bridge, the palace of the popes, Laura's tomb—and determines to make the most of it.

One half-hour And the sun, when she started, was already slanting across the tall roofs of the hotel; and, in these regions, night, like winter, overtakes you at a bound Well, in small things,

broken bridge ; she glances up at the palace of the popes ; on her homeward road, at the instance of a franc-seeking sacristan, is persuaded to visit a church, mediæval, incense-flavoured, garlic-haunted, in quest of Laura's tomb. Ten minutes later—emerging into an unknown street and by an opposite door to that through which she entered—the girl finds herself benighted !

“The sun’s rim dips, the stars rush out,
At one stride comes the dark.”

Jet has, literally, to rub her eyes and gaze about her ere she can believe in the reality of this sudden darkness. Alas ! the sharp increase of cold ; the hush that, with the sun’s departure, has fallen, like a cloak, upon the city ; lastly, the fact that the old sacristan is lighting a lantern, as he locks the chancel gates behind him, confirm it only too forcibly !

This sacristan, carrying his church keys

in one hand, a villainous little oil-lamp in the other, would seem to be the solitary link left between her and the living world, her one uncertain chance of getting back from mediæval shades to lighted shop windows, paved streets, and the Hôtel de l'Univers to-night.

And she follows him.

Never was will-o'-the-wisp a more fatal guide. Down one narrow alley, up another, glimmers the lantern, clank the keys. At length, in a kind of cul-de-sac, narrower and darker than the rest, overhanging roofs and upper stories shutting out all but one narrow strip of sky overhead, the sacristan—keys, lantern, and all—disappears, as suddenly as a figure in a Christmas pantomime. There is a momentary crash, as of a porte-cochère swinging heavily on its hinges, a crash echoed and re-echoed down the length of the whole row of houses, and Jet, alone, guideless, trembling, is left to realise her desolation.

She looks fearfully about her; she thinks of her father, she thinks of Mark—for the

beating heart Jet Conyngham nerves herself for the worst.

That the approaching human being shall prove a robber is, naturally, the first idea that presents itself to her mind. She is to "meet her fate" (though after a different fashion than she dreamed of) here, in the south! Well, she has about her two napoleons in gold, seven francs, a watch, a pair of sleeve-links, and five pounds of Coteau-Brûlé grapes. If she is to be robbed, most probably she is to be murdered likewise. Poor little Cora will read an account of the tragedy in the daily papers—out of compliment to Aunt Gwendoline it may even be copied into the *Exeter Dispatch*—

"—Miss Jet Conyngham, I believe," says a voice. Ah, that welcome English voice, coming to her in her direst need—when will Jet forget its accents! And the footsteps cease.



CHAPTER V.

BEAUTIFUL BY PROXY.

JHE new-comer stands in the middle of the narrow street. As he speaks, a lamp, carried from one window to another in the neighbouring house, sends a momentary flash of light across his face, and Jet remembers him.

“ You . . . you were in the salon, at the Hôtel de l’Univers, when I left poor papa. How in the world, sir, did you come to recognise me here ? ”

To this point-blank question a raw lad like Mark Austen might be tempted to give a veracious reply, easing his conscience by the confession that he has, in fact, dogged

stranger is a man twelve or fifteen years older than Mark Austen; a man of the world, who has gauged the market value of veracity, and wears not his heart, if he possess one, on his sleeve.

“These chance meetings are extraordinary, are they not? But the truth is, Miss Conyngham, I was more than half commissioned by your father to go in search of you. I do not know whether you are aware of it,” he adds, “but you have managed to find your way into the most cut-throat, red republican quarter of the whole city.”

“Have I?” cries Jet, with somewhat sceptical intonation. “Good heavens, sir, what a Saladin that makes of you! It is all the fault of Laura’s tomb, and of a sacristan—a miserable old man to whom I imputed respectability because he carried a bunch of church keys. That has taught me a lesson . . .”

“Never again to be imposed upon by the gloss clerical, I hope?”

"Exactly. Now, unless you wish to assist at your own assassination, as well as at mine, do you not think it would be well for us to make a start?"

The stranger offers his arm; Jet takes it; and five minutes' walking through a labyrinth of lanes, threaded by the Englishman with the ease born of long acquaintance, brings them into the Rue Calade; a broad, well-lighted street, where may be seen officers playing dominoes inside handsome cafés; coquettish young ladies behind the counters of glove and cigar shops; gas, pavements, well-appointed carriages, civilisation.

"And, at least, we are in no further danger of our lives," says Jet Conyngham, drawing her hand from beneath her protector's arm, with a tardy recollection of the conventionalities, and of the circumstance that as yet she does not know his name. "I am sure, papa and I can never sufficiently thank you, a stranger, for——"

"Mr. Conyngham and myself are not strangers to each other," interrupts her

"Which just takes away the whole edge from the situation," thinks the girl, among whose virtues gratitude does not seem to hold a prominent place. "An old friend of papa's! Somebody's husband, doubtless. Most probably a clergyman. So much for my hero!"

And she turns, shyness, embarrassment—if, indeed, she was ever threatened by such weakness—at an end, and looks at him.

He is, beyond all comparison, the most (outwardly) "heroic" personage who, as yet, has crossed the prosaic paths of Jet's life; the colonel of the regiment, Mark's rival at that ill-fated archery ball, not excepted. A tall, black-haired man of six or eight and thirty, with a head finely set upon a pair of stalwart English shoulders, with even features, cleanly cut as those of a stone Antinous, with iron-blue coldish eyes that admirably set off the pallid olive of his skin—a man that an artist could not choose

but look after, on a city pavement or in a mountain sierra, clad in a Bond Street “ulster” or a peasant’s ponchero, in broad-cloth or in rags !

At the present moment he wears a suit of the nondescript grey in which Englishmen ordinarily pursue their travels ; a scarf, containing just the smallest dash of colour, round his throat.

Jet Conyngham, her quick girl’s eyes taking in every detail of his appearance at a glance, feels reassured as to clause number two of her own suppositions by that dash of colour.

A peripatetic clergyman may wear a coat of any hue, even of any cut, if his views be sufficiently broad ; a tie with a dash of colour in it—never.

As regards the question of his being somebody’s husband or a free man, she must remain in doubt—but only for another two minutes. An incident, trifling in itself, however fruitful of untoward consequences, sets the matter at rest for her.

Coming out of the Rue Calade, a short

where may be found some of the best shops in Avignon ; among others, a modiste's—its windows well stocked, not with Parisian chiffons, but with the unchanging fashions of the district, the graceful peasant coiffures of Arles, Avignon, and Orange.

Jet lingers, drawn by the instinct that must ever attract a pretty woman towards becoming headgear. Her companion, as in courtesy bound, lingers also.

“ Mademoiselle Palmieri, Nouveautés.”

The stranger reads aloud the name that, in gas-illumined capitals, flares above the central window ; then, taking forth a letter from his pocket, he bends forward to the light, opens, and examines it.

“ We spoke of chance meetings, Miss Conyngham. Here is another whimsical accident. I received a letter from Italy, this afternoon—a letter from a lady, I need hardly say—asking me, if I stopped in Avignon, to purchase some kind of finery at the shop of Mademoiselle Palmieri. The

commission was put out of my head—by subjects of greater interest," says the Englishman, gallantly, "but a man cannot escape his fate in these things. Here I am, without will of my own, standing before Mademoiselle Palmieri's very window——"

"Ready to execute your correspondent's orders! I have no doubt," says the girl, "that you are an excellent judge in matters of millinery. Some gentlemen, I have heard—married men, of course," this in a tone of profound compassion—"will buy you a bonnet or a hat better than you could buy it for yourself."

"Unfortunately, the gift is denied me. I know when I see a handsome girl becomingly dressed." Something in his tone converts the remark into a compliment. Jet Conyngham blushes. "There my science ends. But you must remember," he adds, "that I can plead extenuating circumstances. I have no wife to educate my tastes."

"Really!" cries Jet, without a moment's hesitation, and in her most mocking voice.

. ~~With many more and was~~
sufficiently interested in the contingency to speculate about it.

The stranger smiles—in the depths of his own consciousness, not with his lips.

“If it were half an hour earlier, Miss Conyngham, I should ask you, short though our acquaintance is, to do me a favour—assist me with your taste in carrying out ‘my correspondent’s orders.’ ”

“It is only half-past five; there is time, and to spare,” answers Jet, with her customary frankness. “Papa always goes to his room for an hour before dinner—my literary resources are comprised in an invalid guide-book and the *Indicateur*. Help me to kill the next sixty minutes, and the favour will be on my side.”

“You are quite sure you do not think me impertinent?”

“I am quite sure that I like looking over pretty things, even though I may be only required to officiate as a milliner’s block.”

"Then I shall take you at your word."

He pushes open the door. A dark-eyed little Frenchwoman, making up her day's accounts at the farther end of the shop, comes forward, with a smile and a salutation, to know what monsieur and madame desire.

Monsieur and madame, after the former has referred to a letter that we know, desire a black velvet Arles coiffure, to be worn by an English lady as an evening head-dress.

"A young lady, of course?" remarks Jet, when the milliner has set forth her wares. "Your friend is as young as I am, sir, younger?"

"Not younger, certainly," is the stranger's answer.

"But a girl? under five and twenty? under thirty? You know, you really must give me some idea of her age. A head-dress like this," taking off her hat as she speaks and bending her sunny head low enough for the little modiste to reach it—"a head-dress like this would be grotesque, a case for the police, surmounting wrinkles and grey hairs."

"In these ways every woman is—the age she believes herself to look."

"What good news for me! I shall never believe myself to look a day over three and twenty."

Three and twenty! The age at which she will become possessed of forty thousand pounds!

It is impossible that the thought of gold can cast a real, objective halo round the face and head of a pretty girl. And still, at this moment, some subtle increase of beauty does seem to accrue to Jet Conyngham in the stranger's sight.

She possesses, in a quite unique degree, the gift of adaptability, a natural instinctive fitness for all artistic or histrionic effect—gift, delightful as it is rare. Beauty, in the great majority of cases, is sadly prone to run in grooves. You will find one woman whose specialty is a Spanish mantilla and a yellow rose—always a Spanish mantilla and a yellow rose. Another who

looks divine in a Madonna kerchief—always, and unchangeably, a Madonna kerchief. A third is unapproachable as a Greek—only as a Greek. A fourth is nothing if she be not Marie Antoinette! Let Jet Conyngham array herself in what she will—yes, though it be the last enormity in the way of a fashionable gown or bonnet, and, true Cynthia of the minute, she suits the dress, or the dress her (how shall we analyse this untaught, unteachable secret of harmony?), without an effort.

“If it were possible to look beautiful by proxy, the Arles coiffure might well become the rage,” observes the stranger, as the little Frenchwoman, on tiptoe, unpins the black velvet loops from Jet’s blonde head. “But it is a fashion few faces could stand.”

“Except mine, of course,” says the girl, with a quick look—a look that he cannot feel to be altogether one of encouragement, and putting on her hat without a glance at any of the mirrors with which the shop is lined—“mine, and the mysterious friend’s—the lady who is no particular age to speak

A minute's walking brings them to the side entrance of the Hôtel de l'Univers. When they have got half-way across the courtyard Jet pauses.

"I shall run up to papa's room at once, and set his mind at rest about my safety. This will entail a narrative of events, and a narrative, to be coherent, requires names, does it not?"

Her eyes finish the remainder of the question—a question to which the stranger replies by taking a card from his pocket-book.

"Names do not really signify," remarks Jet with dignity, and bestowing no downward glance upon the bit of pasteboard she holds between her fingers. "I could think of a friend—I mean of some one to whom I had talked for half an hour—quite as pleasantly without a name as with one. But papa is methodical in these trifles."

"Mr. Conyngham knows my name well," returns the stranger, raising his hat in acknowledgment of his dismissal. "I hope it will not always be unfamiliar to his daughter."

And they separate.

Jet walks in with her stateliest air, her head raised well aloft, as long as it is possible for her new acquaintance to see her. Then, with a step like lightning, she runs up the winding stone escalier and makes for the solitary gas lamp that is burning in the corridor of the first floor.

The card contains neither title nor address; only two words, printed, foreign fashion, in small Roman capitals:

"LAURENCE BIRON."



CHAPTER VI.

HIS REVERENCE AND MILADI.

“ ‘ **H**IS Reverence and Miladi.’ Why, my dear madam, it is a story of five years’ standing. Ever since poor Sir George’s death —’twould be scandal against Queen Elizabeth to say *before*—the two names have been familiar to the ear as household words from one end of the Riviera to the other.”

A very young old gentleman and a very old young lady are talking over their neighbours’ characters with zest: the hour, nine of the evening; the scene, a vast and well-filled salon, in the Grand Hôtel Paradis, at Esterel.

On the centre ottoman of the room is

Jet Conyngham, conspicuous alike by her position, her animated beauty, and the fact that the Reverend Laurence Biron is at her side.

Mr. Conyngham occupies the most comfortable, most sought-for sofa the salon possesses. A half-pretty Scottish widow, holding serious views, and wearing a Marie Stuart cap, pays him attention.

Around the room are scattered whist-players; players at go-bang, bezique, chess; players, even, to the unhappiness and confusion of their fellows, of the pianoforte.

One or two mild, very mild flirtations seem attempting to struggle into existence; but furtively, precariously. The masculine elements of the assembly are mostly lads in the first stage of shyness, or old gentlemen in the last stage of senility; and, numerically, stand in a proportion of about one to five towards the stronger, more independent sex.

These, the strong and independent, muster in force. Ladies travelling without their husbands, ladies in charge of husbands,

of robust-minded spinsters, come to years of maturity

"We girls should not be over-severe on each other, I know," says Miss Wylie; the old young lady whose conversation with the young old gentleman I have interrupted. "Still, if this other unhappy entanglement exists——"

"As it certainly does exist," interpolates the gentleman with decision.

"I call it positively *culpable* for such attentions to be encouraged—attentions that may almost be looked upon as those of a married man. Pray, Major Brett, do you believe, you naughty creature, who have so little faith in anything—in this story of Miss Conyngham's being heiress to forty thousand pounds?"

And Miss Wylie shakes back a crop of ringlets—ringlets belonging, alas! too palpably to the Beautiful for Ever order of charms—and looks up, with infantine vivacity, in the old major's face.

She is a giddy artless thing of eight or nine and thirty, travelling alone, "naughty girl that I am," confesses Miss Wylie, prettily, with her maid, in search of climate—climate and the affections, like the lady in Lothair. Somewhat coldly looked upon by her own sex, Miss Wylie's inexperience renders her a haunting terror and affliction to every Englishman she comes across. For, guileless in all things, it is in money matters more especially that her ignorance of the world is apt to show itself. Either she has forgotten to provide herself with circular notes, or a letter of credit is wrongly dated, or there is no making these foreign people of business understand the value of cheques, and *would* you, although you first had the honour of her acquaintance at the table d'hôte yesterday, assist her with your advice, or introduce her to your banker, or write your name—"of course, gentlemen understand these formalities better than we girls can"—upon the back of one of her little bills? Poor Miss Wylie! Who and what she really is, whence she

"Forty thousand pounds is a sum worth running risks for, under any circumstances," remarks Major Brett, with guarded vagueness; "but when to forty thousand pounds you add, not a Miss Kilmansegg, but a handsome girl of nineteen, one cannot wonder that even the Reverend Laurence Biron should be tempted into playing a hazardous game. And a hazardous game it is," muses the old major, crossing his arms, and looking up with a Lord Burleigh shake of the head at the ceiling, "a deuced hazardous game for a penniless fellow like his reverence to begin playing fast and loose with a woman the age and temper of Miladi!"

Major Brett is the most curiously well-preserved little octogenarian extant. He acknowledges to the fourscore years himself, so I may venture upon setting them down in black and white without extenuation. Not a wrinkle has time written on his smooth, whiskerless, red-sienna face; his

teeth are a marvel ; his faculties of sight and hearing intact. Walking behind him, as he trots briskly about the streets of Esterel, "news-mongering" away the hours between midday breakfast and six o'clock dinner, a stranger would probably rate him as a man under fifty ; would, I am sure, back his chances at an insurance office against half the men of fifty of his acquaintance. He dresses, invariably, à la Thiers, in brown : a long brown frock coat, with velvet collar ; pantaloons of the same colour, but a shade lighter than the coat ; a brown felt hat, a white cambric necktie, in which is pinned an amethyst brooch, and a flaxen wig.

There are persons living who remember Major Brett, brown coat, amethyst brooch, tie, wig, and all, a flâneur of the boulevards, in the days of Louis Philippe.

Half an hour's chat with the old man is as amusing as a chapter of Raikes—Raikes, but with a goodly sprinkling of Horace Walpole's spite. What dynasties he has seen totter, what men and women fall, what

and political ; such details, more especially, as throw light upon his own Walpolian views of human nature !

Some octogenarians you will meet, admirable narrators of fifty-years-old gossip, but dead to the hearsays of the hour. Not so the little old major. He spends his winters, as regularly as Frederick Conyngham himself, in the south, and is acquainted with all the knowable (some few unknowable) characters between Marseilles and Naples. An adept in every branch of scandal, in scandals matrimonial—the specialty of the district—he is unapproachable. The precise words that A and B said to each other for the last time, what they wrote, what they thought, what they ought to have thought, what they did not think—in all these delicate finishing strokes, master touches over which your mere vulgar Paul Pry invariably bungles, he is unerring.

An old bachelor himself—a bachelor in

the story of whose four-score years of life no whisper of a love-affair finds place, he has an absolute genius for chronicling the marriage hopes and joys, the settlements, unions, jealousies, separations, of other men.

“Lady Austen is in the enjoyment of just nine hundred a year. You understand, my dear madam, that the conversation is strictly between ourselves? Nine hundred a year, representing some eighteen thousand pounds of capital, over which her control is absolute.

Well, she and her son do not get on——”

“Lady Austen has a son?”

“A very fine young fellow of one or two and twenty, but who does not care for the Reverend Laurence Biron. Naturally. If he had chosen it, Biron, I suppose, might have made the nine hundred a year his own, a twelvemonth and a day after Sir George’s death. But he did not choose it—there, perhaps, one respects the fellow. He did not, without a struggle, bow his neck to such a bondage.”

“Mr. Laurence Biron seems to me to

“Biron is a bit of a chameleon, no doubt—carries an assortment of neckties about with him in his portmanteau, and is prepared at any moment to hoist whatever colour it may be most expedient to sail under. In the society of Miladi he has to wear the regulation turn-down collar, with coat-tails to his heels. Lady Austen is a staunch upholder of liveries and titles. She used to bring in poor Sir George’s K.C.B. on her invitation cards, has been known to dismiss a servant for addressing her otherwise than as ‘Miladi,’ and never speaks of Biron without giving him his prefix of Reverend. That is how they originally came by their cognomen—‘His Reverence and Miladi.’”

“His Reverence does not look particularly reverend at this moment,” Miss Wylie remarks, with a severe glance across her fan.

“No. As Miss Conyngham’s suitor we behold Mr. Biron, a layman, full-blown. When he has married a wife with forty

thousand pounds he will have the delightful liberty of remaining a layman for ever."

"Not," says Miss Wylie, emphatically, "a very irreparable loss to the Church of England, or to any Church!"

"*When* he marries a wife with forty thousand pounds," repeats Major Brett, a look round his thin old lips that might well chill Laurence Biron's hopes, could he behold it. "My dear lady, I do not pretend to greater wisdom than my fellows, but I should like to take any number of bets, to give any amount of odds, in the matter of his Reverence (after all, one feels sorry for the man) and that forty thousand pounds."

"She has not got it? Miss Jet Conyngham's face is her only fortune?" suggests Miss Wylie, eagerly.

Major Brett passes his fingers, smooth little white fingers they are, through the wavelets of his peruke.

"If Biron displays one-half the sense I give him credit for, he will keep his ambition within the limits of the known. Lady Austen's comfortable income, those good

not to be quenched by crude generalities.

" You know more than you choose to tell me, bad man," she whispers, lifting a playful forefinger of reproach. " Why, I have heard you say that you and Mr. Conyngham have been meeting each other for the last five and twenty years. How can you possibly be uncertain as to whether his daughter is an heiress ? "

" Who says that I am uncertain ? " returns the major, with an air of innocent frankness. " I am, on the contrary, perfectly positive that Frederick Conyngham's daughter is an heiress. He married—let me see, what year was it in ? I returned to London in May Palmerston was Premier one of the fullest seasons ever known—exactly four and twenty years ago, next spring, Conyngham married a lady all the young fellows in Florence were wild about, a West Indian octoroon."

" An octoroon ! Well, now you mention

it," says Miss Wylie, giving a meaning glance at Jet's rose-and-white English face—"now you mention it, I do see a decided coarseness about the poor girl's lips."

"Do you, indeed?" cries the old major, with a chuckle. "There, my dear madam, you have the advantage of me. I see no trace of coarseness, no tint whatsoever of the negress, in Miss Jet Conyngham. But then I am getting old—old, and my sight fails me! Yes, Conyngham married this West Indian lady, and by the will of an uncle, a sugar-planter, who died six months after the marriage, the sum of forty thousand pounds was left, strictly tied up, to Mrs. Conyngham's child or children. There is no manner of doubt as to the facts."

"And still you would make any number of adverse bets with regard to Mr. Laurence Biron and the forty thousand pounds?"

"Still I would make any number of adverse bets with regard to Biron's chance of possessing the forty thousand pounds Ah, what have we there? Open windows—draughts!" And the little old major

window war commencing. I must go and stand by—see that there is fair fighting and no favour on both sides."





CHAPTER VII.

MOONLIGHT, OR ASPHYXIATION ?

WHENSOEVER has passed his winter in any of the monster sanatoriums, the great hotel hospitals along the Mediterranean coast, must have learnt that society in such latitudes is prone to be factious.

"Tis like life on board ship. A hundred or more chance-assorted individuals find themselves bound, during a certain inevitable number of months, to eat three meals a day in company, to exchange civilities, to play whist together, to consult each other's tastes, to listen to each other's music, to laugh at each other's jokes.

And by the time every man has well

Two or three marked characters, people gifted by nature with the dangerous talent for leadership, have emerged a head and shoulders above the crowd. They have followers, they have rivals, they have deserters. The spirit of faction once fairly aroused, and no one knows whom he may call his friend. The people who think as you do, the people who do not think as you do, are alike unreliable. What principles, what absence of principles, can stand upright under the combined influences of absolute idleness, and of little cherished personal likings or dislikings perpetually trodden under-foot?

Thus: You start for your afternoon's walk among the olives on terms of amity with your next-door neighbour, Number Nineteen; divided from you, alas! by the thinnest partition of lath-and-plaster; a structure all too frail for human friendship to depend upon. You return, looking for-

ward to your quiet hour of writing, smoking, or sleeping before dinner, and find Number Nineteen has started an harmonium!

The man who professed respect for your opinions, sympathy with your tastes, and who knows that he has got you helpless in his power for the next three months to come, has started an harmonium!

You try weakly to appeal to his finer feelings. You are delicate, and your hour of sleep before dinner does more for you than physic or physician. You are poor, and your little bit of pre-prandial scribbling just enables you to meet your weekly hotel bills.

Finer feelings! The man is an egotist, a fanatic for music—his own music, well understood—and has none.

The doctors tell him he must occupy himself. His passion is Mozart. He proposes to work steadily through the whole of Mozart's masses (on the harmonium) during the course of the winter. And you carry your complaints to the bureau; the bureau where—so a printed form in

Prussian, is cut to the heart that the tastes of Numbers Eighteen and Nineteen should differ ; will use his best endeavours to have matters arranged to the satisfaction of both. Monsieur le Secrétaire, a Frenchman, is desolated ; he adds his regrets, his promises to those of the patron, and bows to the ground as he holds open the door of the bureau for you to depart. Neither of them remembers your wrongs or your existence for five minutes.

For two days you and the man with the harmonium do not speak. On the third day the Polish countess of unknown antecedents, on the floor immediately above you both, begins a series of little afternoon teas, with dancing. You make up your feuds and join issue against the monstrous innovation. You go down, this time together, to the bureau. Again the proprietor is cut to the heart. Again the secretary is desolated. Neither of them stirs an inch. By

the day after to-morrow the countess has invited you to one of her parties. You think her a charming woman; rather like than dislike the cheerful sound of dancing from an upper floor; and, on the question of antecedents, are prepared to fight her battles against all comers. At the end of a fortnight you receive a hint that the lady, among her other accomplishments, draws capital character sketches. Well, if you insist upon hearing the truth, it *was* a little harmless caricature of yourself that was furtively handed about last night in the salon, and over which everybody, your friend Number Nineteen in particular, looked so deliciously amused!

The Grand Hôtel Paradis at the present time, the second week only of November, is already cut up into the usual cliques and factions.

There are the people who have musical instruments; and those whom musical instruments drive wild.

There are people with dogs, with birds, with sewing-machines, with nurseries.

theatricals, who would fain turn the salon into a stage.

All these minor sources of discontent, however, these trifling disparities of taste and feeling, are as nothing before the great civil war which convulses the hotel to its centre on the subject of ventilation. Are the windows of the Paradis to be kept open, or are they to be kept shut, throughout the ensuing winter?

A small, very small, minority of the body politic remains neutral; thinks something may be urged on either side; that the opening of windows should depend upon the state of the external atmosphere, or upon the general vote of such number of invalids as may happen to be present. But the opinions of these cold-blooded reasoners go for little.

Read history, if you would see how much influence men of common sense, "trimmers,"

disciples of compromise, have ever obtained in great popular questions, disturbing the peace and agitating the passions of their fellows!

“Nail the windows up for good. Close doors and passages hermetically. Render draughts impossible.”

So says one half of the English people inhabiting the Paradis.

“Keep the windows permanently opened, night and day. Take out top panes. Render the rebreathing of vitiated air impossible.”

Thus speaks the opposition.

And both sides have the advantage of fine generalship. On both sides are chiefs, prepared for a lengthened campaign, and ready to dispute inch after inch of vantage-ground, even at the point of the sword.

An irascible old lady of rheumatic dia-thesis and implacable watchfulness, an old lady holding good, old-school doctrines as to night air and chills, and who, if need were, would deprive herself of lawful rest and food the better to scan the movements of her adversary—this is the leader of the conservatives.

at his fingers' ends ; a sanitary philanthropist, looking upon the health regulations of the universe as, in a certain measure, placed under his own personal inspection ; uncompromising, it might almost be said unscrupulous, when the questions of carbonic acid and sulphuretted hydrogen are trench'd upon—such a chieftain have the members of the opposition.

To-night the two leaders are destined to come face to face.

In the middle of her rubber, obstinately playing her aces second-hand, scorning her partner's calls for trumps, declaring to her adversaries that everything they do or say or look is "Not whist," the irascible old lady suddenly feels a cold shiver pass down her backbone.

She starts to her feet, draws back a curtain, and discovers—that the enemy has outwitted her.

At nine o'clock p.m., secure in the sense

that some sixty pairs of human lungs, with a well-piled fire and a couple of dozen gas-burners, are doing their worst on the atmosphere— lulled, I say, to rest in their fallacious belief, the whist-players have been sitting—with a window open not six feet distant. Air, *night air*, damps, chills, rheumatism, pouring in upon them in volumes !

At this precise juncture the philanthropist enters by an opposite door—a glass door leading from a terrace, and which, in accordance, alike, with his custom and his principles, he leaves open. The irascible old lady stands in a thorough draught. The ribbons in her cap bristle. The very gas-burners flicker.

It is a thrilling situation, and one appreciated by the audience. In an invalid foreign village the general complexion of human life is such as to make people snatch at whatever incident of dramatic interest may present itself. The remaining whist-players lay down their cards and exchange glances. The performer on the piano stops

SCEENE OF ACTION.

For a moment both belligerents pause.

I have said that the leader of the opposition has an aspect florid as morning. His eyes are ingenuous; his lips wear a smile of universal benevolence. At the present season, November half spent, he dresses as though 'twere the dog-days, in an alpaca coat and white waistcoat; wears no cravat to speak of, and turns back his shirt collar with boyish airiness from his throat. His attire, his face, a certain jaunty freshness pervading his whole presence, would seem to indicate a perfectly aggressive condition of health, physical and moral.

The irascible old lady crosses the salon with an angry run. She stands, confronting him.

“ May I beg, sir, as I have been forced to do a dozen times before, that you will have the kindness to shut that terrible door when you enter or quit the salon? ”

The philanthropist looks around him blandly.

“Twenty, thirty, forty—yes, there must be quite forty pairs of lungs in the room, each consuming five cubic feet of air per minute. Peclet says five, Reid ten, Arnott twenty. I, myself, incline to the opinions of Arnott. Do you not think, as a matter of simple necessity for you whist-players, that we may venture to admit a breath of purer atmosphere? Whist, madam, entails thought. In thinking, some molecular change goes on in the nervous substance of the brain, to the renewal of which oxygenated blood is necessary, and——”

“Oxygenated!” exclaims the old lady, upon whom the word seems to act as a direct irritant. “I think, sir, the less said on the subject of oxygen the better! There is a window, a *window* in this salon open, immediately behind the whist-table at which I habitually sit. And it has been open the whole evening.”

A smile of triumph flits round the philanthropist’s lips.

The enemy sees it; and being but mortal, loses her temper and her self-command.

and breadth of the salon—"we do not accuse you of so dishonourable an action as setting that window open, and drawing a curtain across it, *deliberately*. You were observed to be the first person who entered the drawing-room after dinner. We may hope that you admitted the night air from inadvertence, that you forgot the unhappy invalids," she gives a wave of her hand around the room, "to whom the consequences of your action might be fatal."

The philanthropist laughs outright. He is too thoroughly engrossed by one set of ideas, too honestly conscious of the greatness of his own mission, to lose his temper, lightly, under provocation.

"Poor invalids! If I did leave the window unfastened . . . let me think . . . yes; I certainly opened it to enjoy the glorious sight of the moonrise over the mountains . . . if I did admit a current of vital air into a room charged with mephitic

gases, such as these, the invalids should look upon me as their benefactor. Why, my dear madam," he goes on, with the most dispassionate candour imaginable, "what, may I ask you, do we come here, to the south, for ? "

"Rheumatism, a good many of us," retorts the lady, waxing angrier and angrier—"rheumatism, and its allied complaints, for all of which draughts and damps and night air are destruction. You hear me, sir, destruction ! "

"We come to the south, my dear madam, for health, for air.

"'Tis air, not gas, for which we pant;
More air, and freer, that we want.'"

The irascible old lady turns on her heel, and murmurs "Bosh."

"We come to revive the free, blithe, unconscious spirit of Hellas"

" . . . We come at an immense expense, sir, and under the advice of our physician, to try the healing effects of warmth. See what Williams's book says about night air. Hear

with every window open, and no fire."

"Ah, Doctor Oldham can commit suicide in any way he chooses. It is no affair of mine. If you go on, sir, opening doors and windows as you do . . . I declare to Heaven," cries the old lady, in a sudden fine burst of wrath—"I declare to Heaven you should be called upon to pay the doctor's bills of the house!"

The sanitary reformer does not lose his temper; but a hard steelly glitter comes into his eye.

"Do you know, my good lady—are you in the very least aware how much preventible disease occurs annually, from vitiated air, throughout the United Kingdom?"

"I know that I will prevent you from killing us all, if I can, sir. Windows are found open in this hotel at every hour of the day and night—yes, night! A better watch is kept than you, perhaps, think for. I know that two nights ago a window was

opened on the floor where I sleep *at midnight*. But I have made it right with the proprietor, I have spoken to Herr Schmidt," announces the staunch old lady, with a glance round the salon, "and he has promised that the interests of the Many shall not be sacrificed to the mad caprice of One."

I have stated that the philanthropist is not wont to lose his temper. At this point in the discussion it must, however, be admitted that "la moutarde lui monte au nez."

"Herr Schmidt!" he echoes, derisively. "Of course, in him you will have an ally. We are all familiar with the German ideas on ventilation and cleanliness."

"Cleanliness, sir?"

"Cleanliness, madam—fresh, pure, clean air. The one vital condition of our existence, by day or by night, in dry weather or in wet——"

"In wet weather! Monstrous."

"Murderous, madam; your Black Hole system is murderous."

“Obstinacy——”

“Infatuation!”

By this time both combatants are flushed in the face, and a dead silence reigns throughout the salon.

The discussion has evidently reached a point at which diplomacy totters on its last legs; and force stands, ready and willing, to take diplomacy's place.

“Sir,” at length demands the lady, solemnly, “I ask of you, for the last time, will you have the goodness to shut the door by which you have just entered this salon?”

“I will challenge the common sense of the whole room first,” says the gentleman, stoutly. “I will not believe that an assemblage of educated people, in the nineteenth century, can elect to breathe an atmosphere compared with which the prisons of Calcutta would be refreshing.”

He looks appealingly round the room. People take up newspapers, or are suddenly

interested in the state of the fire, or of the gas.

No one catches his eye; no one utters a response.

Such is human nature—hotel human nature, at all events. And a private canvass, a couple of hours ago, would have assured more than half the entire number of votes in favour of ventilation.

But civilians, like some soldiers, will fight well enough behind intrenchments, yet shrink from meeting the enemy in the open field.

"If any persons wish a door or window left open, will they hold up their hands?"

Not a hand is uplifted, save that of little Major Brett; and his only reaches a sufficient elevation to cover his lips.

"You see, I hope?" cries the old lady, her face lit up by the triumph of hardly gained victory.

"I do see," says the gentleman, with emphasis. "I see, but I cannot breathe. I shall therefore return to the terrace, counteract the poisons I have been inhaling

regards your prospects of asphyxi-
ation ! ”

And, making a low and sweeping saluta-
tion, the philanthropist quits the room;
shutting the door with such marked good-
will as to set every gas-burner, every pane
of glass in the windows, shivering.

“ Now is the time to show forth the faith
that is in us,” observes Laurence Biron to
Jet. “ Principles, in the abstract, I look
upon as a mistake ; still there are occasions
when it is politic to assume them, if we
have them not. Which alternative do you
choose, Miss Conyngham ? Coffee in the
moonlight, or asphyxiation ? ”

“ I am most decidedly not for asphyxi-
ation,” answers Jet, promptly.





CHAPTER VIII.

ORGAN-MUSIC AND CHAMPAGNE.

LIVE acres of the tropics transplanted into a corner of Provence. Terrace above terrace, odorous with frangipani and the night-flowering cereus ; brilliant, in mid-November, with bushes of crimson hibiscus, with trailing purple bignonia, with roses, myrtles, and cassia, in full bloom. Partition hedges of aloes and cactus, growing in such wild luxuriance as they never reach in any English hot-house. The gleam of statues the splash of fountains high above all, a line of stately palms ; the outline of their delicate feather fronds cutting sharp, as though carved by fairy hands in

and on one of its upper paths the Reverend Laurence Biron and Jet Conyngham pace slowly to and fro in the brilliant moonlight.

Far away on the horizon the shadowy forms of the Golden Islands cleave the Mediterranean's purple. Scattered over the intervening plains, the occasional lights from some lone farm or hamlet may be seen to gleam from out a dusky setting of cypress and of olive. In the foreground the little town of Esterel nestles beneath its castle-crowned steeps.

The night is still, yet buoyant; cool, sparkling, dry; such atmospheric perfection as you may experience in England twice, perhaps, if you are fortunate, during a twelvemonth, or seldom.

"Air, 'like organ-music and champagne,' as some one has said," remarks Jet, pausing in her walk and turning her face, westward, towards the serrated ridges of the Montagnes des Maures, the direction from

whence such soft breeze as there is is faintly blowing—"it seems to me I never really breathed until we came to the south. Devonshire mists and vapours may do well enough for people to the manner born. I am half American. I like to get through everything, my breathing included, at high pressure, and Dulford, very decidedly, did *not* suit me."

"Half American!" repeats Laurence Biron, quickly.

. . . . Ten days have elapsed since the first melodramatic meeting of Jet and her "hero" in the dark lanes of Avignon; and during these ten days Mr. Biron's acquaintance with the father of forty thousand pounds has fast progressed towards intimacy. He became the Conyngahams' travelling companion from Avignon onwards, making himself useful to the invalid in a thousand unostentatious ways upon the journey; since their arrival at Esterel he has been the constantly devoted attendant (after a somewhat different fashion) both of Mr. Conyngham and of Jet. And yet, until this moment, not an

presented itself.

"Half American, Miss Conyngham? I had understood that your mother——"

"My mother was a Boston woman," answers Jet, unconscious of his question's drift. "She died before I was a year old. I never spoke to an American in my life until three weeks ago. Papa deposited me in Aunt Gwendoline's keeping when I was a baby, and my experiences have been Dulford, Dulford, Dulford, from the first chapter to the last; and yet, during the short time we spent in Paris, I was asked by a dozen people at least if I did not hail from the States. Something in my face or manner, I suppose."

Something in her face or manner? Why, of course! A child might have known that the legend of the West Indian pedigree was false. Because a beautiful girl chance to be heiress to forty thousand pounds, the world—envious, small-minded—must credit

her at once with African progenitors, see traces of black blood disfiguring the sweet carnation of her cheeks, a suspicion of wool amidst her waves of golden hair!

The Reverend Laurence Biron feels as though a weight were lifted from him.

He knows, or ought to know, how far he would let an ebon ancestry stand between himself and money. He knows, or ought to know, how far he would let *anything* stand between himself and money. But Biron is a man who "poses" for his own benefit, as he does for that of spectators; he is artificial to the last fibre of his nature. Principles he avowedly looks upon as a mistake. In the inmost recesses of his conscience he has, still, a code of what may be called æsthetic morality for his immediate personal use; and the beauty of the girl with whom he has begun this solemnest piece of acting of his life, her beauty, her youth, the ineffable, wild freshness which is Jet Conyngham's salient and distinguishing charm, have actually touched such capacity for better feeling as still exists in the man's jaded breast.

self, his friends (if he possess any) may say that a young and lovely Englishwoman, not a gold-washed octoroon, has married him for love for that his suit with Jet will ultimately prosper, not so much Laurence Biron's vanity as his really excellent knowledge of women's characters already assures him.

"I gave you credit for being only half English the first hour I saw you, Miss Conyngham." This is strictly true. Had he not in that same hour received Miladi's letter of advice? "Something alien to Mrs. Grundy in your walk, your speech, something—how can one describe the indescribable?—about your whole look and manner forbade the supposition of your being a genuine Briton."

"Is that a compliment?" she asks. "A somewhat doubtful one, I should say, judging from what one reads in books."

"The writers of books evolve their facts

out of their bookshelves ! Any man who uses his eyes, not a gazetteer, must know that beauty is cosmopolitan ; that the most subtle charms of all come, indeed, of mixed parentage. I have lived among the States people " (among what nation of the earth have the cruel ups and downs of fortune not forced Laurence Biron to live !). " I know American women as they are, in their own country, their own homes."

" And your verdict is—— ? "

" My verdict is, that a pretty woman is a pretty woman, always, no matter whether her place of nativity be Paris, London, or New York. Perhaps," adds Biron, " if I had to assign the most fitting background to each, I would put the Parisian in a ball-room, the Englishwoman at an afternoon garden-party—— "

" And the American ? "

" By my own fireside, as the bright and sunshiny companion of my life."

" Ah," cries Jet at hazard, " I understand. Mr. Laurence Biron left his heart in the States."

The girl has been looking at her companion until now with her accustomed keen, unabashed gaze. At his words her eyes droop, she turns her face aside from him and blushes furiously.

What cause is there for shame? What should send the blood in this ridiculous fashion to her cheeks?

Jet Conyngham is ignorant of love's very alphabet; too ignorant by far to spell out the meaning of her own emotions, or suspect how far the game that we play with iron dice has, already, progressed.

“Your heart is in Esterel!” she repeats, forcing herself to look round again, forcing her voice to maintain its tone of banter. “Well, the admission sets at rest a certain wild conjecture that crossed my brain when we were buying the peasant headdress in Avignon! I took it into my head, just as I was looking ‘beautiful by proxy,’ that your Italian correspondent—the lady of no

particular age—might be . . . Mr. Biron,” breaking off into one of the abrupt neck-or-nothing leaps by which Jet is accustomed to dispense with the cumbersome process of reasoning, “I am suddenly reminded of another subject, of something which I had unaccountably forgotten till this moment. I heard all about you, sir, from an unbiassed authority, on the very evening that papa and I left England.”

“All about me?” repeats Biron uneasily.

Jet Conyngham has never noticed (being, in truth, no acute reader of character) how habitually ill at ease the Reverend Laurence Biron is; how restless—despite an acquired cool manner, to which his handsome person lends grace—with life and with himself.

“I hope the ‘all’ was not very atrociously bad, Miss Conyngham?”

“I hope not, I am sure, for your sake.”

During the space of a second or two he is silent, palpably thrown off his guard; then, “Tell me the name of your informant,” he asks her. “Quelle est la femme? Knowing the source of the scandal, I shall be

“ In that case there would most likely be no scandal at all.”

“ I understand. You think that men are superior to small malice or uncharitableness ? ”

“ I think men as a rule are backward in talking about each other’s affairs,” he answers, with rather forced carelessness. “ As a matter of personal taste, I know that I would at any time rather have a man for my enemy than a woman ; unless, perhaps, it were to be an enemy on a very grand and epic scale.”

“ Grand and epic ! If you could have seen us—me, I mean—and papa, and and the person who spoke of you. We were drinking tea at Folkestone an hour or two before going on board, and some one, papa it must have been, mentioned Lady Austen’s name, and then out it all came.”

“ Lady Austen’s name ! ”

Laurence Biron moves a step away from the girl's side; he leans with folded arms across the balustrade of the terrace, and gazes, in a sudden fit of mental abstraction, upon the scene before him.

There lie the Golden Islands—the Golden Islands, to whose shores he and Lady Austen have made so many a tête-à-tête boating excursion in the days of old.

There stand the olive-shrouded hills, through whose every defile and glade he once was wont to ride—Lady Austen his companion.

A country cart comes noisily rattling along the white highroad from Marseilles. The jangle of the mules' bells seems to wreath itself into a kind of fantastic marriage peal—the marriage peal, so some mocking voice whispers busily in his ear, that shall some fine morning be rung for the Reverend Laurence Biron and Miladi!

"She must be a character worth meeting and studying, I should guess." Jet's voice recalls him from the world of embarrassing retrospect and equally embarrassing fore-

entire knowledge of Lady Austen and of her eccentricities has come to me through her son."

"Mr. Mark Austen, the only son of a widow," observes Biron; recovering, as if by magic, his usual airy assumption of indifference. "I can better understand now how much was comprised in the word 'all.' Young Mark would not find anything favourable to say of me—doubtful, poor boy, if young Mark would find anything favourable to say of any one. The Austens from generation to generation enjoy the reputation, I should tell you, of being the very worst-tempered people on the habitable globe."

"You have found them so?" she asks, looking full, and somewhat searchingly, in Laurence Biron's face.

"I have—to my cost. Poor Sir George, during his lucid intervals, was one of the most excellent old gentlemen breathing.

Unhappily, what with gout, port wine, and the family predisposition combined, the lucid intervals were rare. Unhappily, also, he took a fancy to myself."

" You are frank in your ingratitude."

" I am frank in most things," says Biron ; probably the least frank man living.

" When you know me better—if that day comes—you will acknowledge that a certain knack of blurting out rough truths is one of the agreeable peculiarities of my character."

" I have not discovered any over-roughness in you yet, sir."

" You have known me under circumstances ill qualified to call roughness forth. 'The olive must be well crushed,' says the proverb, 'before it gives out its best oil.' You must see me tried in the furnace of adversity before you discover all my virtues."

" Am I to understand that Sir George and Lady Austen were your furnace of adversity ? "

She feels feverishly, unwarrantably curious on this theme; eager to learn what his relations have been, are, and are to be, with Mark's mother.

(Mr. Biron might not unjustly add “something of a banker,” did he tax his memory severely.)

“But I had the consolation of feeling myself vicariously of service; a kind of lightning conductor, turning aside the vials of his wrath from others. For a man so absolutely without useful object in life, a man so thoroughly an incumbrance upon the face of the earth as I am, that was something.”

“I see. Lady Austen is cannot be” An access of shyness, most unusual, causes Jet Conyngham’s lips to falter. “Cannot be a very young woman by this time, considering that she is Mark’s mother?”

“Lady Austen is fifty-one.”

The spirit of sincerity has, it is evident, taken possession of the Reverend Laurence Biron to-night; some subtle inspiration, born of self-interest, warning him that to

succeed with Jet Conyngham it were well to approach the borderland of truth as closely as the tortuous nature of the paths wherein he treads will permit.

“Fifty-one!” Unconsciously to herself, the girl’s breast heaves a little sigh of relief. “Almost papa’s age. Quite an old, old lady! Then it was *not* for Lady Austen, of course, that you bought the peasant headdress that evening in Avignon?”

“Ah! that evening in Avignon! How little I thought,” says Mr. Biron, dexterously turning Jet’s thoughts into a safer channel—“how little I thought when I was following you and the sacristan away from the church, that ten short days would see us as good friends as we have become! Apropos of the sacristan, you threw out some aspersions against ‘clerical people,’ I recollect, that stabbed me deeply as we walked along in the dark.”

“I should not have thought any aspersions in that direction would touch you very nearly, Mr. Biron.”

“Should you not? And why?”

"Miss Conyngham, I am mortally offended. It is the cruellest thing that has ever yet been said to me. Will you make amends by taking one more turn before we go back to gaslight and asphyxiation? There is a legend that Corsica may be seen from the upmost terrace of the garden under the palms."

"If I were sure papa would not want me—"

"Mr. Conyngham is in the safe keeping of Marie Stuart — Marie Stuart grown saintly! No fear, in an hotel full of ladies, that your father will experience neglect. During all the winters that I remember seeing him in the south, Mr. Conyngham has invariably been submitting to the ministrations of some excellent woman, concerned alike about his body and his soul. Besides," adds Biron, "it is early still. See, there is an alpaca coat we know still fluttering in the breeze upon the dining-

room terrace. We may have yet another half-hour of freedom, if you choose."

. . . . What an exquisite half-hour it is ! The air in the upper garden is even crisper, more exhilarating than below, the view wider. One, at least, of the two human actors in the scene feels nearer to the stars and heaven !

When at length the ringing of bells, the movement of many lights, betoken that the Paradis is about to settle for the night, Jet Conyngham turns, and gives a last lingering look at the placid beauty of the palm-shaded walk they are quitting. Half absently she plucks a flower or two from an intensely sweet, white-blossomed plant beside which she stands.

"The Ixora," remarks Laurence Biron, stooping to pick up the scattered petals that her hand has touched. "One of my favourite flowers. The Ixora lives through a single night of autumn moonlight, Miss Conyngham, then dies under next morning's sun. You have not time to get tired of it."

Does the Ixora, with its dozen hours of
life and fragrance, prefigure the duration
of her own too-keen happiness ?





CHAPTER IX.

“OFF WI’ AN AULD LOVE.”

NOONDAY breakfast—a meal at which the fluctuating *morale* of the Grand Hôtel Paradis may be fairly said to reach low-water mark!

Dinner, by comparison, rises, almost, to the level of conviviality. At dinner, a menu of a dozen dishes gives, at least, the Barmecidal impression of a choice of food : there is gas, there is glitter. By dinner-time, too, the invalids, or quasi-invalids, have picked up something of an appetite during their afternoon’s wandering upon the castle heights and among the fir-forests.

At breakfast—or, as the dozen German

visions, among whom. Among us, do I say? You see the remains of yesterday's dinner disguised, horribly, under whatever mixture of sweet or sour sauce it may enter the Teutonic heart of the chef to devise; with a dish of "Loup," "Bass," or other tasteless fish, for the like of which the Mediterranean sea-board has won evil celebrity, in addition.

Now is the hour for complaints, deep-toned and open; for regrets over good beef and mutton left behind in England; for proposed Round Robins to the ever-promising, never-fulfilling Schmidt and secretary. Now are small personal griefs and squabbles merged in broader interests, in common righteous vituperation of the chiefs of the commissariat.

The irascible old lady feels that her enemy of the night before is a man and a brother as she listens to him protesting, in French, Italian, German, against the enormity of

being served with "Loup" on four consecutive days in one week. The half-pretty Scottish widow (Marie Stuart grown saintly) almost gives a smile of encouragement to Miss Wylie when she hears that sprightly ingénue contesting the freshness of the cutlets with the inflexible Prussian head-waiter. Poor Miss Wylie, whose advances, on the score of curls, shoulders, and unprotectedness, the widow has ever sternly refused to countenance! Little Major Brett well-nigh forgets to be malicious in his indignation over tough mutton, Berlin sauces, Toulon eggs, untraceable fish, and all the other gastronomic curiosities with which Riviera breakfast-tables are wont to be set forth.

. . . . Well-nigh—it is right to interpose the adverb! Not even the vital interests of the table, not even the threatening ghost of indigestion itself, can wholly turn aside the Major's mind from thoughts of warfare, or blunt his honest joy in being able to give a safe and telling home-thrust to any such of his fellow-creatures as he may happen to dislike.

larity Mr. Biron can boast.) And on the occasion of which I write, the morning succeeding Jet's moonlit walk under the palms, a weapon, irresistibly well-sharpened, poisoned to a nicety, comes ready to the old Mohawk's hand.

“Der Englischer lonch” is at twelve. Just before the conclusion of the meal—a dessert of indigenous grapes, dates, and figs in full circulation—enters the factor, with the noonday Italian letters, one of which he deposits, under the guidance, and with the interpretation, of a polyglot waiter, beside the Major's plate.

“A billet-doux, depend upon it, Doctor Oldham,” murmurs Miss Wylie, turning coquettishly away from Major Brett to address a dejected-looking Englishman, in spectacles, on her other hand;—a professed misogynist, poor fellow, living under the same roof with close upon a hundred ladies,

and having Miss Wylie for his immediate neighbour at breakfast, lunch, and dinner ! “ I don’t think I ever saw him look so well-pleased before. The naughty, naughty Major.”

The naughty, naughty Major, having carefully read his letter through twice, goes on with the preparation of his dessert; washing each little brown bunch of grapes in a tumbler of water, washing his dates, washing his figs ; a man, evidently, accustomed to southern countries, and provided with resources against their more crying evils.

When these arrangements are completed, he leans forward and addresses Laurence Biron, who is sitting a couple of places higher than himself, and immediately opposite Mr. Conyngham and Jet.

“ Florence terribly dull, still, I hear, Biron,” holding his letter up, playfully, between the second and third fingers of his left hand. “ Only forty people at the best-filled table d’hôte in the city.”

“ Ah ? ” responds Biron, with frigid indifference, and moving his head about a

“*Our friends never really suggest to me*
until the end of December, does it ? ”

This time Mr. Biron would seem to hold the question, or the questioner, or both, unworthy the exertion of a monosyllable.

A filmy fire twinkles in the corner of the old Major's eye. He passes his fingers, with ominous deliberation, through the scanty wavelets of his blond peruke.

“ And so my correspondent (a mutual friend, by the way) tells me she is about to start for Esterel ‘ pour se distraire.’ Her friends may expect to see her ‘ d'un jour à l'autre.’ I can never help admiring the impartial admixture of foreign languages—ha, ha, ha !—one might almost call them, of *unknown tongues*, in Lady Austen's letters ! ”

At the name, Jet Conyngham looks up, quickly. She looks in time to note a change of colour, slight, but to her, at least, distinct, on Laurence Biron's face.

“ Lady Austen is a capital correspondent,” he remarks without a moment's hesitation.

“She writes as she speaks ; brings herself and the subject she tells you about directly before your eyes—the perfection of letter-writing. Mr. Conyngham,” turning his shoulder with cool unconcern upon his interlocutor, “you feel strong enough, I hope, to join the expedition to Tamaris this afternoon ? ”

Major Brett eats his well-washed grapes in silence ; not loving Laurence Biron the better, you may rest assured, revolving in his mind some future stab under which the fellow, with all his insolence, shall be forced to writhe, but loth to try any further measurement of swords with him for the present.

Let no one dispute the importance of the part played by a handsome face in the mixed drama of our destinies : this comedy to those who think, this tragedy to those who feel !

How often, during the eight and thirty years that Laurence Biron has strutted his little hour upon life’s stage, has that fine person of his stood him in good stead ; with

strait has he contrived to pull, where a sinner with a pug nose or slanting forehead must infallibly have gone to the wall ! The look, the gesture, that from a man of mean presence would be an impertinence, from Biron are superb. Whatever buffetings he has got of fate, and they have been many, he has ever taken them as he takes the present waspish sting of the little Major, with a certain nobleness—an outside dignity, by which (even although you acknowledge it to be veneer) you could scarcely fail to be impressed.

. . . . And yet the sting is a sharp one. The bare possibility of Lady Austen receiving letters from the Hôtel Paradis is fraught with danger to his hopes. Let Miladi hear how matters stand between himself and Jet Conyngham, let her receive but a hint of his serious infidelity, and Biron well knows that she would be capable of any stroke of vengeance, callous to any prospect of ex-

posure. Had he earlier suspected this untoward correspondence he could have armed himself against its results. Major Brett might possibly have been silenced ; at least for another week, at least until he, Biron, could openly declare himself Jet Conyngham’s suitor.

But it is evident that matters have gone too far for compromise.

Miladi about to start for Esterel—it may be, on her road thither, already—pour se distraire ! A woman like Lady Austen coming from the gayest city in Italy to one of the quietest invalid villages in France for amusement !

Why has he not better utilised his time ? Why, last night on the terrace, did he not risk his all (literally, he feels it to be his all : the one, last, supreme good fortune likely to come near his ruined life) and speak ?

“Don’t you think it would do papa a world of good to join the donkey-party ?” Jet’s fresh young voice breaks in upon his reverie. “I have been trying to persuade

“And I tell you, my dear, that no chaperonage is wanted,” says Mr. Conyngham, a little captiously. “The whole thing is a mistake. There is a point of mistral in the wind, and you would do far better, all of you, to confine yourselves to the promenades near the town. In any case, it is impossible that I can be wanted. Mr. Biron, I am sure, will have the kindness to see that you are back within shelter of the house before sunset.”

Poor Mr. Conyngham, it must be remembered, has never been called upon to fulfil the duties of a vigilant parent, or learn the vital difference between men of fortune and detrimentals. He knows that excursions, picnics, attempts of any kind at social festivity, are distasteful to himself. He knows that there is “a point of mistral” in the wind, and that he means to spend his afternoon, on a camp-stool, in the warmest corner of the Jardin d’Acclimatation ;

Perugino at hand, with extra scarves, cloaks, and umbrellas :—possibly, the Scottish widow, also on a camp-stool, and ready to ply him with the mild little attentions, semi-pious, semi-mundane, that his soul loves.

"If Miss Conyngham will accept them, myself and my walking-stick are at her disposal," says Laurence Biron. "A chaperon can scarcely be needed for an afternoon's saunter through the fir-forests of Tamaris. A donkey-driver may."

"The offer is one to be closed with—especially as regards the walking-stick," returns Jet. "If I followed inclination, I should go to Tamaris on foot, but papa seems to think donkey-riding the right thing for me—a kind of graceful compliment that I owe to the invalids of Esterel."

"It would be much more prudent to give the whole expedition up," Mr. Conyngham remarks. Well for Jet had that opinion been carried into effect! "The best thing ever said by a Frenchman was Pascal's observation as to half the miseries of our

..... upon saying. . . .

. . . . “I shall do wisely to run down to the portico and look out for the steeds,” cries Jet, rising from table with the easy abruptness that sits so well on her. “I got authentic information as to their capabilities from the old donkey-woman, before breakfast. Stradella kicks and lies down. Le Petit Noir rolls when he sees sand. Ragout, alone, is faultless. I mean to secure Ragout, before any one else can forestall me. Mr. Biron, will you come ? ”

She crosses the salon with her accustomed buoyant, dancing step, her girlish face lit by the kind of gladness that it is a pleasant contagion only to behold. Laurence Biron follows her.

“I am afraid the coming of Lady Austen is likely to prove inconvenient,” whispers Miss Wylie in the old Major’s ear. Long ere this the poor misogynist has swallowed his breakfast and escaped. “Mr. Biron will have to realise the truth of the proverb

about being 'off wi' an auld love'—don't you think so?"

"Lady Austen must not be permitted to come, yet awhile," says the Major, an expression that omens ill for Laurence Biron hovering round the corners of his lips. "She has asked me to take rooms for herself and her maid in this hotel. I shall telegraph back word, at once, that none can be had until the end of the week. Biron is a charming fellow—a very charming fellow, indeed. It would be a thousand pities to see so fine a chance as has befallen him spoilt."

And, in effect, when the donkey-expedition has started, when Mr. Conyngham, with Perugino, camp-stools, wraps, rugs, and the Scottish widow, are out of sight, the little old Major trots briskly down the deserted High Street, and makes his way into the telegraphic bureau that adjoins the post-office.

"Major Brett, Esterel, to Lady Austen, Florence.

"Not a room to be had, yet. Have

So it would seem that the Reverend Laurence Biron has, absolutely, one more friend in the world than he reckons on !





CHAPTER X.

MORAL DELIRIUM TREMENS.

BETWEEN Esterel and the mountains that girt the sea lies a plain, as fertile in wine, corn, and oil as any in Europe.

The crops of maize and hemp are now gathered in ; the grapes have gone to the wine-press ; but, as yet, no look of barrenness, no want of colour, reminds the passer-by of nature's decay, of coming winter. Sycamores and abeles are still thick in leaf. The vines trail over the ground their last long wreaths of crimson and of ochre. On every side the small wild pumpkin clothes bank, fence, and gable with its graceful foliage, its balls of saffron gold. In the

delicate, evanescent sweetness. Along sheltered valley paths the lizards dart, the butterflies flutter as though 'twere June. The country people sing lazily over their work of olive-picking in the shade. It seems, to one happy girl's heart, at least, as though all genial sunny southern life must be epitomised in the clear perspectives, the subtle, enchanted mellowness of the scene and hour!

The cavalcade from the Hôtel Paradis keeps together, in tolerably orderly procession, as long as the way lies along wall-bounded road, along level ground. The moment the pine-woods are reached, idiosyncrasies, both of man and beast, begin to show themselves. Stradella kicks, Le Petit Noir rolls with his rider in the first available bank of sand, Ragout, the faultless, taking example from his fellows, refuses to move another step.

"And so ends my first and last attempt at filial obedience," cries Jet, as she hands over her Rosinante, with alacrity, to one of the drivers. "Your walking-stick has fulfilled its duty, Mr. Biron." Need I say that Laurence Biron is at her side? . "And I have fulfilled mine. Poor papa has been so exercised about respirators, blue spectacles, and white umbrellas, that I have long felt it a matter of conscience to give in about donkey-riding. At length I have done it!"

"And need be troubled by conscience no more," says Mr. Biron. "Conscience, you know, is a myth (we have it on the best authority of the nineteenth century!)—'A casual product of education; a deposit, accidentally left, in the crucible of experiment' Now, are you under anybody's charge, Miss Conyngham? I ask the question of set purpose."

"Something exceedingly vague was said about chaperonage," is Jet's answer. "I don't know that it got much farther than your promising to see me home before night-fall, did it?"

thickest part of the forests, that I know well."

He ought to know it—very well. How often has the Reverend Laurence Biron wandered lingeringly along that track, in other company than Jet's!

"You will see such arbutus as you have never seen in your life," he proceeds, in answer to some slight hesitation that he reads upon the girl's face. "And by going a couple of hundred yards out of our way, we can take in the ruined chapel of Ollioules. Everybody who stays in Esterel pays a visit to Ollioules."

"I am not sure that 'everybody' is an inducement," says Jet. But as she speaks, she yields. "The temptation would be a path that no one's feet had trodden before one's own."

"When I was your age I should have thought the same," answers Biron. "Now

that I am growing old, I prefer prosaic and well-beaten paths to the possible inconvenience of novelty. You will take my arm—no? You do not find such an ascent as this too steep for you?"

"If you are growing old, as you say, it is I that should offer, you, accept, the support," cries Jet, with one of her little airs of mockery. "Now be sure, sir, you do not let me walk too quick for you. Care for the old and infirm is not one of my virtues, I am afraid."

How fair she looks, turning her sparkling face over her shoulder as she speaks to him! What affluence of youth, of hope, of promise is in her every tone and movement!

To most people enjoyment comes by fits and starts. With Jet Conyngham it is perennial. Each of her hours, as it flies, is vivid, full-flavoured; her high-pitched temperament intensifying commonplace life as older, less fortunate people contrive artificially to intensify it, by music, opium, wine, the drama, love.

Laurence Biron, tired of all things, of

is not pardonable in a pretty girl of nineteen? What eccentricity is not adorable in the heiress to forty thousand pounds?

They saunter slowly, slowly, through the forests. . . . Ah, these southern pine forests on a roseate November day; every varied, fleeting blush of autumn painting glade and thicket; the arbutus berries ablaze; lavender, myrtle, and giant wild thyme lading the warm air with incense! Do you suppose two people, each more than half in love, would remember prudently to consult watches, or keep count of distance among such surroundings?

By the time Biron and his companion reach Ollioules the sun has grown visibly nearer the horizon; the shadows lie long. Unless Jet Conyngham take heed, darkness will surely overtake her unawares, as it did in Avignon; again, as in Avignon, with the Reverend Laurence Biron for a protector.

But Jet's spirit is lifted too high above

mundane considerations for her to dread this, or any other danger. They enter the little chapel, a ruin save at the chancel end, where just sufficient roof holds together to shelter a primitive altar, two upright slabs of marble, before which, at harvest and vintage feasts, mass still is occasionally said.

A solitary figure kneels there, a mendicant Brown Brother, his hollow face half hidden by his hood, his wan hands clasped above his head, a crucifix between them, in rapt and silent prayer.

At the sight of this poor figure, contrasted with the sunshine and joy of the external world, Jet's heart is thrilled, she knows not how or wherefore. A choking sensation, nearly allied to tears, rises in her throat.

Mr. Biron takes out the needful materials from his breast-pocket, and begins to roll himself a cigarette.

"You have so often given me leave to smoke, Miss Conyngham, that I forget to ask permission. The usual perverting influence of kindness upon human nature."

superstitious. His tone is so unaffectedly loud that the Brown Brother looks round from his devotions with a start.

Jet Conyngham feels herself chilled.

Not quite for the first time instinct tells her how wide a gulf lies between her faith (her simple child's faith in human nature, however disguised) and Mr. Laurence Biron's *cui bono* philosophy.

"Hush! We are disturbing him," she whispers, drawing hastily back towards the door.

"Disturbing whom—what? Oh, the praying fellow?" says Biron. "They are a pest throughout all the South, veritable locusts infesting the land. Still, I suppose the artists could not do without them—as foregrounds."

"And you do not believe in that man's honesty?" exclaims Jet, her lip a-quiver.

"The honesty of moral delirium tremens!"

Biron answers, with his usual satisfied inconclusiveness. "I cannot say that I have ever looked at a Brother from so high a plane. They are honestly dirty, and honestly fond of getting money. Thus much is certain."

And the remark receives prompt confirmation. When they are about a dozen paces from the chapel of Ollioules, the Brown Brother overtakes them—and begs!

As Biron tosses him a franc, Jet sees the poor wretch's face, full.

It is sallow, sunken; thin, to the last point of emaciation. Two cavernous dark eyes flame from beneath the shadows of his hood. The knotted rope around his waist is stained with blood.

"One of the numerous order of Flagellants," says Biron. "You have not been in Italy yet? I thought not. You would soon get tired of the odour of sanctity there—picturesque penitents, atoning for their sins by hair shirts and knotted ropes, but paying for their wine and macaroni out of the purses of the heretical."

Brother. "Self-sacrifice, even though it leads nowhere, is a thing so rare one must respect it. If these poor fellows are thorough, I think members of some other Churches might imitate them to advantage, especially in the matter of knotted ropes."

"Miss Conyngham, you are severe."

"Not upon you, sir. Hair shirts and knotted ropes are matters with which I should never dream of connecting Mr. Laurence Biron."

Something in her manner is little to Biron's liking.

"You think me indifferent," he exclaims, with well-assumed, if it be not genuine, earnestness—"indifferent, on the highest, most vital of all subjects. A score of times I have divined your opinion of me, with pain. If you knew . . . but these are things scarcely to be spoken of. . . . The truth is, Miss Conyngham, from the time I was a lad at college, I have been an eclectic."

Jet's studies not having familiarized her with the term, she remains silent.

"Sharp dogmatic views, blind adherence to High or Low, are what advances a man in the Church of England. My opinions have been my own, at least, never the watchwords of a party. And I have not advanced. At seven and thirty, the fellows who began life when I did, filling prebends' stalls or good fat livings, you see me as I am!—a Bohemian; I had almost said a Pariah."

"A Pariah, Mr. Biron, you!"

"A kind of black-sheep parson at best. A clerical outsider, esteeming myself singularly lucky if I can conduct a service, or coach a pupil, for the three or four winter months, and at all times too diffident of my connection with things spiritual to venture upon the prefix of 'Reverend' before my name."

Well, reader, if Jet Conyngham had had a few more years' experience of men and things, or if Jet Conyngham were still fancy free, small doubt that she would set down

though such abstinence lead away from prebends' stalls, need not, necessarily, deter a man from doing his work in England as a curate. Bohemianism (in luxurious southern hotels, at fifteen francs per diem) can scarcely be looked upon as the legitimate and logical outcome of "eclecticism."

But Jet's sound common sense, for the first time since she was born, is warped. And the tone of Biron's voice, a certain wearied expression on his handsome face, strike to her heart.

Like all young and enthusiastic women, she is disposed to martyr-worship. What martyrdom so touching as his who sacrifices temporal advancement, temporal wages, for conscience' sake, and at the lofty bidding of conviction?

"Forgive me, Mr. Biron. I spoke foolishly. There must have been sufferings harder to bear than hair shirts and flagellations in a life like yours! Can you forgive me?"

"Forgive you," is his answer. "I should ask, on the contrary, if you can pardon me for speaking of matters so closely personal that they can interest no one but myself. But do you know that is a witchcraft you possess?"

Somehow, it does not surprise Jet Conyngham that, as he speaks, Mr. Biron should take her hand and draw it gently within his arm.

"You make me feel, in spite of your youth and my age, that I can talk to you from my soul, talk as I could to no other human creature on the face of the earth."

"Not even to Lady Austen?"

"Lady Austen! Really, I am glad to think you will soon make her acquaintance, know my mysterious friend and correspondent as she is. An excellent-hearted creature, take her altogether," admits Biron, magnanimously. "I should be the most ungrateful fellow living, were I insensible to Lady Austen's sterling qualities. Warm-hearted when she takes a fancy, liberal, as regards money——"

able institutions, to the poor, or how?"

"Oh! liberal to the poor, of course," says Laurence Biron. "Surely, Miss Conyngham, you do not undervalue the virtue of munificence?"

"I think it a remarkably cheap virtue, I must confess. What form of self-sacrifice can be lower than that which entails but the trouble of taking out a purse? But, then, I am absolutely indifferent to money," she adds, with unaffected carelessness.

"You are, fortunately, in a position where you can afford to be indifferent."

"I do not know about that. My sister and I have grown up, as I dare say you have heard, always looking a large fortune in the face. Well, since the time we were urchins, so high, it has been a settled thing between us that—were there no such thing as law—we would gladly have drawn lots for the heiresship. Cora the heiress, Jet the pauper. Jet the heiress, Cora the

pauper. . . . What would it have signified? Could the possession of some poor forty thousand pounds add a fraction to your happiness?"

Laurence Biron feels, with fervent sincerity, how infinite a number of fractions it could add to his. But he has sufficient tact to keep silent. With a living paradox, a creature eccentric, flighty, impulsive as Jet, he feels how easy it were to overstep the bounds of prudence in this delicate question of money.

Probably, ere this, the girl has had mercenary wooers. Even to himself, Biron would not admit that he could be classed among them, and, woman-like, feels jealous of the fortune that stands in the position of rival to her face.

"Your sister will be here this week, will she not?" he asks, with a duly toned air of interest in all for which she cares. "I am looking forward eagerly to seeing her."

"Dear good little Cora! Yes, if Adolphus allows her to start, at the last, Cora will be in Esterel in four days."

"Cora's future husband, the Reverend Adolphus Myers, Rector of Dulford. She is staying at his mother's house now, poor little soul!"

"You pity her for being near her lover?"

"I pity her for having a lover to be near. Fancy a child who has never seen anything of the world but Devonshire, electing to pass the remainder of her days in Dulford—as a clergyman's wife, too!"

"And often I have wished to know
How you could marry a solicitor."

To become a clergyman's wife is evidently not your beau-ideal of human success, Miss Conyngham?"

As Biron speaks, a sharp bend in the path brings them to the limits of the upland forest. The village of Tamaris lies at their feet; its flat-roofed white houses, its solitary row of cypress standing out in vivid relief against the blue background of the Mediter-

ranean. Upon the right tower the giant granite masses of the Col Noir, purple already at their base, but with every exquisite upper air-depth bathed in violet, rose, and amber by the sinking sun.

The sudden crispness of the air, the true Riviera sensation of a summer's day iced, brings forcibly home to Jet's mind the lateness of the hour—the distance from the Hôtel Paradis. And she looks round her with a start.

Not a trace of the donkey pilgrimage, not a trace of any living form, is to be seen.

"So much for your short cut, Mr. Biron," she cries, a little tremor in her voice. "I cannot regret it. I cannot regret anything so beautiful as Ollioules and the forests. But I know that night is coming on, and that there is a four-mile walk between us and Esterel."

"By the time the sun is down, I undertake to say that you shall be within shelter of the Paradis," answers Biron, quietly. "It is now half-past three. Fate has timed it all for us to a nicety—and exactly below,

back with Stradella and Ragout, you and I can return by rail, and reach the hotel before them. This leaves us, still, thirty minutes to the good. Are you dissatisfied?"

Dissatisfied! Standing thus, amidst the freshness of the woods, her hand on Biron's arm, the wild pageantry of western sky before her, it is to Jet Conyngham as though she stood upon the brink of Eden.

And her eyes betray her.

Now, or never more, thinks the Reverend Laurence Biron, is the venture to be made, the one possible emancipation of his fettered, humiliated life to be played for!

He remains for a minute irresolute; a minute of tension so keen, of calculation so nice, as to be almost agony. Then, as though moved by uncontrollable impulse, he throws his arms round the girl's slight figure, draws her, abruptly, to his side, and kisses her.



CHAPTER XI.

AN AESTHETIC CONSCIENCE.

“**M**Y fate was decided in the first moment that I saw you at Avignon, Miss Conyngham.”

“After the sacristan had led me astray. I accept the compliment, Mr. Biron. In that first moment it was dark as Erebus.”

“I had seen you, already, in the salon of the hotel. Little though you suspected it, I had watched your every movement, admired the feminine astuteness of your arguments as you brought your father, inch by inch, to consent to your going out——”

“And then followed me, of course with prophetic knowledge that I should come to

think of me, that first evening in Avignon?"

"I thought your face the fairest that ever shone on mortal man."

"I do not want to hear about my face. What did you think of me, Jet Conyngham? It seemed to me, afterwards, I ought not to have taken your arm."

"It did not seem so to me."

"Or have gone shopping with you before I knew your name. That could not have been correct?"

"It was a great deal better than correct. It was frank, ingenuous, unfearing, like yourself! The only chill I got was when you took my card and wished me good night. You showed no human feeling, whatsoever, no faintest curiosity as to whether Smith, Jones, or Robinson had been your companion. You lifted your head in the air, a great deal higher than you lift it at this moment, Miss Conyngham,

and walked majestically away ; leaving me, morally and physical, in the cold."

The thirty minutes to the good have not yet expired. The lovers stand, still, at the same point of the forest : the darkening fir-thickets behind, the pink and opal glories of the sunset in front : the point whose remembrance, for ever and ever, married to Laurence Biron, or divided from him, must cut Jet Conyngham's life sharply in twain, as with a sword.

No formal declaration or acceptance has passed between them—do formal declarations ever take place save before the foot-lights ?

A kiss, a whispered word a few seconds during which Biron's arms locked her close. This is all Jet remembers of the supreme crisis of her existence.

But, none the less, does Biron know that he has won her, irrevocably.

In the case of an heiress who chanced to be a woman of the world as well as heiress, Mr. Biron would scarce feel satisfied without some exact promise, some definite

by some instinct truer than himself, to be sufficient. The girl will be his wife.

"And when I think that a short fortnight ago we were strangers to each other!" he whispers, tenderly. "My good fortune seems beyond belief. How have I deserved, how shall I ever deserve, such happiness as has fallen to me?"

"I might ask the same question. What can there be in a foolish girl of my age that, out of the whole world, you should have chosen me?"

Her humility almost occasions Mr. Biron a pang of compunction. That Jet Conyngham, or any other woman, should care for him, well, rather than wisely, is not surprising. Laurence Biron has not reached his thirty-eighth year without testing his own powers of fascination. It is her meek surrendering of wealth, her unconditional acceptance of a man so notoriously bankrupt.

as himself, that well-nigh pricks his moral sense.

"Your father may take a different view of my merits to yours," he remarks, gravely. "We need not consult him, yet. For three or four days, whatever comes, let me know the taste of a Fool's Paradise! Your father may well hold you too young, too fair, too gifted in every respect, to be thrown away on me."

"Thrown away!" she exclaims, smiling at him with her eyes, though her lips keep serious. "I have forbidden you to pay me compliments, Mr. Biron. Do you wish the tables turned? Am I to begin making pretty speeches to you, or are you in jest?"

"It is a matter of sober earnest, I am afraid. I am a very poor man; what is worse, perhaps, a man without prospects."

"A man with your ability cannot be that!" she cries, a flush rising on her face. "For money, as I told you, once, already, to-day, I care nothing. I *have* ambition. I should like to see you distinguished through your own work, your own talents."

Personal ease, personal comfort, the certainty that he need never again put on a white tie—save for a dinner party: never again submit to tyranny or caprice of Lady Austen's. . . . This is the limit to his philosophy, to his hopes; this, as much as he desires from that poor vanity of vanities, that “unstable equilibrium of moral forces which we name . . . Life !”

“ You are enthusiastic, Miss Conyngham, and your enthusiasm sits well on you. Only, do not forget that I have just eighteen years less heart in everything than yourself.”

“ Are you always going to call me ‘ Miss Conyngham,’ I wonder ? ”

“ I have been waiting for your permission to say ‘ Jet.’ ”

“ Jet ! ” Mr. Biron’s manner of dwelling on the name, turns it, in its owner’s ears, into a caress.

“ I could have fallen in love with a girl

called ‘Jet,’ ” he adds, “ even if I had never seen her.”

“ For me it is a misnomer. People have told me so from the time I could run alone. But it is a favourite Boston name—an old name in my mother’s family, and I have not been put out of conceit with it. ‘ Jet’ should, properly, be a young person with an alabaster skin, and a high, polished forehead. Her hair and eyelashes should match her name. Her profile should be Grecian, her temper perfect.”

“ Temper ! ” exclaims Biron, in mock alarm. And taking both the girl’s hands, those long, shapely, sunburnt hands of Jet’s, he raises them to his lips and presses them there : presses them with a kind of slow delight—much as one might inhale the sweetness of June’s early roses, or the first freshness of daybreak. “ You do not mean to tell me you possess a temper ? ”

“ If you had not made me prisoner, I might give you a quick answer to that question.”

“ Prisoner—poor little Jet ! ” Still keep-

science, reserved for rare and picturesque occasions?) upon her candid face. "Some day, perhaps, you will realise the meaning of that word 'prisoner.'"

"Just as some day, perhaps, you will realise the meaning of the word 'temper.' Depend upon it, Mr. Biron, I shall, under all circumstances, be able to take care of myself. I am made of stout materials."

"How soon do you mean to leave off calling me 'Mr. Biron'?" he asks.

"Never, I should think," is Jet's answer. "What better name could I find for you than your own?"

"And still, I am forbidden to call you 'Miss Conyngham'!"

"That is different. It seems natural, a matter of course, to hear you say 'Jet.'"

"And it would seem natural, remarkably pleasant, at all events, to hear you say 'Laurence.'"

She thinks the subject seriously over for a few moments, then shakes her head.

"If I tried for an hour, I could never bring my lips to speak it, Mr. Biron. Just think! I have only known you a fortnight. You are eighteen years older than I am, and——"

"If you were logical, child—mind, I do not expect it of you—I only remark *if* you were logical (as your father will, doubtless, be), these considerations might hold good in weightier questions than that of Christian names."

Jet does not answer.

"Come! I give you one minute for reflection," he remarks, still holding her in close captivity. "Our time is short. The train will pass through Tamaris almost immediately. But I am determined, before we leave this spot, that you shall call me 'Laurence.' You know, I have you in my power."

"Have you, indeed? That is saying a great deal more than any living being has ever been able to say yet."

"I cannot look at my watch." And, in truth, Jet's wrists are strong. It requires

"*You suppose I refuse to obey;*
"You will have to pay the penalty of
your disobedience."

"Mr. Biron . . . Sir!"

Her colour deepening angrily, her eyes
flashing fire, as she discerns his meaning.

He loosens her hands in a second.

"We will not speak of penalties. I ask
you for a kiss, Jet, given freely, and of your
own accord."

She hesitates: pride, coyness, shame,
painted, by turns, upon her face. Then a
feeling stronger than all these gains mastery.
She murmurs his name: she lifts her arms
around Laurence Biron's neck.





CHAPTER XII.

BACCARAT.

MR. CONYNGHAM'S "half point of mistral" comes to fierce maturity, towards midnight. Next day, a very cyclone bursts over Esterel. Dust and gravel are borne along the narrow streets in columns; chimneys are blown down, roofs are blown off. Fragments of palm, aloe, and cactus, all the latest autumn glories of the Paradis garden, beat up in showers against the salon windows. Not a fire in the house but smokes; not an inmate of the house but grumbles.

In vain do Schmidt and secretary pronounce it to be a saison exceptionnelle;

like Mr. Conyngham, wrap themselves in furs and cloaks, wretchedly exultant over their fellows, and pronounce the winter to be beginning. Let sanguine newcomers, believers in London physicians, and in the climate of the south, wait till February if they would see the mistral at its worst!

Towards evening it rains; not as one sees the process conducted in England, but rather as though sheets of water were being flung, earthward, from some cyclopean fire-engine in the skies. And then comes another outburst of mistral; and then, during two consecutive days and nights, dull, steady, downpouring torrents of sleet and rain.

On the third day, rain or shine, the Reverend Laurence Biron finds himself obliged to give up the taste, hourly becoming sweeter, of his Fool's Paradise, and to depart for Nice.

Brilliantly certain though his prospects

may be, clearly though Jet's forty thousand pounds may loom before him in the future, Mr. Biron, at the present moment, is in one of the chronic money difficulties of his life ; Schmidt and secretary having hinted to him, politely, but with firmness, that his two last hotel bills remain unpaid. Le Reverend was unaware—so Schmidt and secretary are assured—that bills in their establishment *never* remain unpaid after the second week. If it would be convenient to Le Reverend to write them a cheque to-morrow morning ?

Not only is it not convenient, it is not possible for Le Reverend to write a cheque to-morrow or any other morning. Le Reverend, bankrupt, even in credit, no longer goes through the form of carrying about a cheque-book in his portmanteau.

A philosopher of old, exhorting his disciples to bear life with equanimity, was wont to remind them that they could quit it, by the act of their own hand, when they listed. “One door stands ever open.”

The door of moral suicide has stood open.

to bow, now, this very present winter, to a destiny too strong for him. Creditors, duns, bill-discounters, Hebrews—with all these ills he is familiar, to satiety. Better, by opposing, end them. Marry Lady Austen, and let his soul die in peace!

Peace, as the legitimate slave of the tyrant, who during years of guerilla warfare has alternately ruled over and crouched before him! Peace, as the life-companion of a withered beauty, an old coquette, a human soul without interest or ambition on this planet of ours beyond pearl powder, visiting cards, M. Worth, and chiffons: a human soul animated by a single passion—including in itself, all minor ones of greed, meanness, jealousy, selfishness—a single, master, and consuming passion vanity!

Well, a man must live; unless, indeed, he fancy a pistol-shot better than a mercenary marriage. (During the small hours

of many a wretched night, after dinner or supper, of which he has been head-jester, the alternative has pressed itself upon the Reverend Laurence Biron's mind!) A man must live; and, somehow, clerical Bohemianism, however picturesque, does not seem to be a well-paying venture after the age of five or six and thirty.

Up to that middle mark of existence, Laurence Biron, throughout all his varied adventures, monetary and otherwise, seemed sure of falling on his feet. Plausible, gifted—with such gifts as society values—young, the world had shown more than its accustomed leniency in condoning the handsome spendthrift parson's offences.

He was poor—let his poverty plead for him; a gambler, but a generous one; a free-thinker, but a free-thinker, who, at least, had the courage of his opinions. Let him come to maturity, work free from the “Austen influence” which had been his ruin, and it would be seen of what material the man was really made.

His thirty-fifth birthday over, and his

Reverend Laurence Biron *was* made, and, seeing, the world shrugged its shoulders, and passed by upon the other side.

In vain, during the past eighteen months, had he sought for duty, as chaplain or as tutor. "Mr. Biron's talents," so, from agencies, and from friends alike, came back the answer to all his applications. "Had he only written one week sooner he might have obtained such a chaplaincy or such a pupil." With stereotyped expressions of regret, with assurances that, should a vacancy offer, his application and his merits would be borne in mind.

No one had a vacant pulpit for him ! Nowhere did any well-paying young gentleman, of neglected education, want a coach !

He was no worse a man than he had been two years ago ; no fonder of baccarat, or racecourses ; no laxer in his clerical views.

Simply, he had grown unpopular.

How if the door of moral suicide should

be shut upon him, if Lady Austen, most fickle of women, should go the way of the crowd, bestow her affections and her jointure upon some Doctor Herzlieb of the minute, and leave him, penniless ?

The possibility had been brought home to him, during a short stay in England, by a certain growing tone of fretfulness in Miladi's letters ; and, as I have said, his resolution was already taken when he met Jet Conyngham. Jet, whom to look at was to love, every whisper of whose girlish voice was music, and whose heart, whose fortune, almost before he had set himself to the task in earnest, he had won.

. . . . Biron's intention had been to commit moral suicide, to become the husband of Lady Austen. Without merit or demerit of his, he finds himself the lover of all that is sweet and pure in woman ; honourable ease his portion for the future, with only an empty purse, only the petty annoyance of Schmidt and secretary asking payment of a bill, as present drawback.

A bill for some three or four hundred

ments Herr Schmidt upon the moderate terms of his establishment. It is necessary that Mr. Biron run over to Nice for six and thirty hours—to speak candidly, it is necessary that Mr. Biron pay a visit to the brothers Ulrich, his bankers. Herr Schmidt, of course, will allow him to remain his debtor until his return.

Herr Schmidt, although the most prudent of Prussians, finds himself powerless before Le Reverend's airy treatment of his claims; and, in the early grey of the November morning, a girlish face, wet with tears, is bent forth from an upper window of the Hôtel Paradis to watch Mr. Laurence Biron's departure. . . . April tears, quickly shed, quickly dried. Jet Conyngham's love is still at the blossoming stage, when to talk of an absent sweetheart is, to a heart of nineteen, only a degree less dear than his presence. And Cora, the one human being

to whom she could speak of Biron, will arrive in Esterel to-night. Poor Cora, with the narrow horizon of Dulford bounding her desires, the unromantic Rector of Dulford for the hero of her life-drama !

Nothing, it has been cynically said, succeeds like success. Biron finds the axiom verified within an hour of his arrival at Nice. A week ago, would MM. Ulrich Frères have advanced the Reverend Laurence Biron twenty pounds, twenty francs, upon his own note of hand ? I think not. A week ago, the Reverend Laurence Biron was only the money-borrowing, impecunious, black-coated adventurer whom MM. Ulrich Frères have known, to their cost, for years ; fair-sounding promises his vouchers, the dim prospect of one day becoming Lady Austen's husband his most valid security.

With his altered prospects his very outward man appears to have changed. As he walks into the bank his air is that of a merchant-prince. He demands an interview with the senior partner as coolly as though his balance constituted the mainstay of

Conyngham's name.

"Before the new year, my dear Ulrich, Mr. Conyngham will be my father-in-law. My engagement to his daughter is not yet formally announced, but I know that I can rely upon your discretion. As to the fortune of my fiancée——"

"The fortune of Mademoiselle Conyngham admits of no question," returns the complacent banker. "Mr. Conyngham's first wife was an heiress—West Indian property—money derived from sugar plantations. I was a boy at the time of his marriage, but I remember the circumstances well. The young lady to whom you are engaged will have a dowry, at least, of forty thousand pounds."

Always that ridiculous legend of sugar plantations and of a West Indian mother! Legend or no legend, the sources of Jet's wealth matter little to Laurence Biron, so

long as the wealth itself becomes his own. The weight of his hundred pounds, all in solid golden rouleaux, appears to him a delightful earnest of his gilded future. He walks about Nice, seeing the familiar shops and streets under the kind of glamour of an opium-eater. Huge orange and blue placards are advertising to the public that the opera will open for the season to-night. The name of Mademoiselle Rose Pinson, a pretty figurante, whom Biron remembers well in Paris, is among the corps de ballet.

He wends his way to the principal Nice flower-shop, buys the costliest bouquet it contains, and has the gratification of flinging it that night, from his old place in the stalls, at the agile feet of Mademoiselle Rose ! Coming out of the theatre the notorious Count Zaffa—a too-close gambling associate of other days—lays his hand on Biron's shoulder. The count proposes an hour's adjournment to the club, for whist. As Miladi is not in Nice, the evenings of his Reverence are, of course, at his own disposal ? Whist means baccarat ; the hour

stands."

. . . . Well, as he travels back to Esterel, in the course of the afternoon, Mr. Biron consoles himself by recalling the adage respecting bad luck at cards. (Curious that a man who looks upon conscience as a myth, upon prayer as moral delirium tremens, should still cling to some puerile, pet superstition in the matter of hearts and diamonds!) To have lost may prove a better omen for his love affairs than to have won. If he could but free himself from the horrible embarrassment of the moment—for, whatever the fate of Schmidt and secretary, his debts of honour *cannot* be slurred over like a tradesman's bill!

It has been decided between himself and Jet that Mr. Conyngham shall hear of their engagement at the first auspicious moment after Cora's arrival. Mr. Conyngham may prove a man easy to deal with on the score

of money, a man belonging to the invaluable lending section of the human race. If not—as money must be had, and immediately . . . why, there is Lady Austen. During all the bygone years, all the stormy vicissitudes of their friendship, Lady Austen has never once drawn back from helping him in his difficulties. And when he is married—ah, when he is married he will taste the sweetness of repaying her every benefit that the cruel reverses of his life have forced him to accept, and with interest !

Absorbed in dreams of Jet Conyngham—I mean of Jet Conyngham's fortune, and of the miserable shifts to which he may yet be put ere he handle it—Mr. Biron finds himself nearing the termination of his journey.

The sun is setting over the mountains of Les Maures as the train passes by Carnoules. And the rose-flushed peaks, the tender opal sky, recall to him, little sentimental though he be, the scene among the fir-woods ; his girlish sweetheart's first blushing whisper of his name, the first contact of her lips ! He is not in love as Mark Austen was in love,

the moment when he shall once more fold her in his arms.

When love and interest are inseparably, vitally connected, even a thirty-six hours' absence may be fraught with peril.

The omnibus from the Hôtel Paradis awaits him by command, at Salon, the little station, five miles from Esterel, at which passengers from the South are wont to stop, in preference to making the longer circuit by Tamaris and the junction. The German conductor advances to greet him, finger on cap. Two other travellers are expected by this train for the Hôtel Paradis. Will the Gnädiger Herr have the complaisance to remain a short five minutes on the platform, while their luggage is being seen to ? Or will the Gnädiger Herr take his place, at once, in the omnibus ?

Biron takes his place mechanically; his thoughts, still, of Jet, and of how, by this time, she and Cora will begin to look for his

coming. Mechanically he listens, while box after box, malle after malle, are being thrown up, with many a muttered *sacré* from drivers and railway officials, to the roof. Mechanically he watches a couple of Englishwomen, mistress, it would seem, and maid, leave the station.

The Englishwomen advance. He hears a voice that he would recognise at the nether pole disputing the porter's demands in voluble bad French. He catches one glimpse of a face! Another moment, and Lady Austen—for it is she—is standing on the step of the omnibus has entered, recognised him.

“Laurence!”



CHAPTER XIII.

SUNSHINE, FIRE, AND DEW.

"**J**AM not clever enough for him," says Jet, regretfully. "That is the one flaw in my happiness. I know that intellectually I am not, never shall be, upon Mr. Biron's level."

"I am sure I wish we knew that Mr. Biron had a comfortable income," answers Cora Conyngham.

It would be difficult to find two sisters more startlingly unlike than Frederick Conyngham's daughters; one reason, perhaps, for the closeness of the affection that knits them together.

Jet, as we have seen, has something of the Juno in her presence:

"A daughter of the gods, divinely tall,
And most divinely fair."

Cora is short, dark, plump ; with black shining hair curling crisply about her little round head; with a pair of black shining eyes; with neat, regular, inexpressive features.

Jet, by temperament, is all energy, all extremes—truest mixture conceivable of sunshine, fire, and dew ! Rebels in spirit (at nineteen years old) against the thousand small meannesses and impostures of artificial life, would see things for herself, rather than learn them through the established chapter and verse of self-satisfied conventionality.

Cora is superficial, indolent ; absolutely without desire to pierce beneath the crust of things. She expects no more from life than that she, Cora Conyngham, should never be called upon to rise early, or walk far, or experience any acute bodily pain. Her ambition is bounded by a brougham on C. springs ; well-dressed meals, served with punctuality ; a comfortable seat in church ;

Of Jet's actions you never can feel certain, beforehand. Just as in certain minerals there exists, fast locked up, a potency of light which it needs but a sudden access of warmth to set free, so, in Jet Conyngham, you feel that there are potentialities, for good or for evil, which any accident of the twenty-four hours may bring into action.

Upon Cora you can calculate as upon an almanack. Her character should be a standing satisfaction to the class of advanced thinkers who know all about the ultimate elements of human nature—moral chemists who, reducing passion and motive to formula, can predicate how many atoms of intellectual oxygen and hydrogen will go to form a generous impulse or an unreasoning hatred. Given certain circumstances, and you can be as sure of her conduct—discreet, sensible, trouble-avoiding conduct, at all times, as you can of an answer in algebra.

If Jet be a living paradox, Cora is an embodied commonplace !

" Of course, until I see Mr. Biron, I can give no opinion about his fascinations. When I remember how delicately Adolphus acted, I must say I think it very odd that he should not, at once, have spoken to papa about money—very ! "

" He has mentioned money over and over again," cries Jet, half petulantly. " And each time I have let him know that I held the subject in contempt. As if it could matter whether a man gifted like Laurence were rich or poor ! "

" It matters that he should have some means of supporting a wife. Mr. Biron has no duty, it seems, and no pupils, and no private fortune. How does Mr. Biron propose to live ? "

The two girls are waiting together in the twilight for the Reverend Laurence Biron's coming. A cheery fire of olive-wood and fir-cones burns on the hearth, the remains of afternoon tea are on the table.

Before Cora's arrival, Jet, at this hour,

the clouds. Cora does not care about mountains—when you have looked at them once ! To tell the truth, Cora Conyngham cares sparingly for anything in external nature. She has always, in November, seen curtains drawn, fires lit, and tea served at a given hour of the afternoon, and likes to see it so.

Forty years hence, if she live as long, you may be sure that Cora, on the anniversary of this day, will be sitting before a fire, somewhere (probably in Dulford Rectory) ; a tea-cup in her little plump ringed hand ; her feet raised to the exact level of comfort on a footstool ; opinions of incomparable reason, narrowness, and orthodoxy proceeding from her lips.

“One hears, always, that same tune,” exclaims Jet. She is walking with impatient steps about the room ; now stopping at Cora’s side, now rushing to the

window as some sound, or fancied sound, of wheels comes along the Marseilles road. “*Why* must a man have enough to support a wife? Cannot a wife support herself? I suppose I should have some means of getting bread if I remained unmarried. What papa pays Aunt Gwendoline, for instance, would buy a good deal more than bread. Must I, necessarily, become a dead, helpless weight upon the unfortunate man who marries me?”

“Unfortunate! Without having seen him, I feel certain that Mr. Laurence Biron is a much luckier man than he deserves.”

“Just as I feel certain that you are a little goose, Cora. We will leave off talking of Laurence before I lose my temper. Speak to him, that is all I ask! Speak to him, hear his voice, watch his face, and see what will become of all your prejudices!”

“I thought we were to leave off talking of him, Jet?”

“So we are, my dear. We will confine ourselves to subjects on which there can be

Cora Conyngham's betrothed ; a name at which neither Cora nor the gentleman himself have ever taken umbrage.

"Yes. For two nights and days he scarcely rested an hour ; and, you see, Adolphus will not take chloral, on principle."

"Principle ! By what process of circumlocution can even Dollikins drag principle into chloral-taking ? "

"Well, one of his aunts died under the influence of chloroform, and Adolphus cannot feel sure the predisposition may not be in the family."

"And what if it is ? "

"Jet ! "

"If Dollikins is so perfectly good a young man, so unworldly, so prepared for heaven, why should he fear death ? Chloral, or a thunderstorm, or the gout, at seventy to a really pious mind how can the when and the where signify ? "

"We tried laudanum, externally," says Cora, who never enters upon abstract or casuistic questions, "and camphorated brandy, and hot flannels. Nothing did him any good."

"Poor—poor Dollikins! If you continue in this affecting strain, I shall weep, Cora, I warn you."

"So then we drove into Exeter, and he had it out. Mr. Pinsum said there were two more that ought to come, but he had not the courage."

"Who—Dollikins, or Mr. Pinsum?"

"Adolphus. You see, it was his duty to think of others. Next day was Sunday. It would not have done for him to get up in the pulpit with a swelled face?"

"I understand. The next time I am a coward I shall be so—from a sense of duty! Cora, dear," after a minute's pause, "now that I have got you with me, there is not one thing for me to wish for in the world. Is not the South a paradise?"

"I beg your pardon, Jet?"

During that minute's pause Cora Conyngham's head has begun to nod.

dream so little," answers Cora.

"The mountains and sea and sky seem made of larger materials than in England. One has more background for one's happiness. Ah, you must wait until you see my Ixora (faded, now, alas!), and the fir-forests, and the palms."

"We saw some nice palms at Kew, last year," says Cora amiably. "Don't you remember? It was the afternoon the Princess was there. She wore a blue bonnet."

"I have not passed one *empty* day since I left Avignon. Every hour, every minute, has seemed fuller than it could hold of enjoyment."

"It must have been a great trial not to have Porter. I cannot think how you have managed to dress your own hair."

"Good practice for the future," cries Jet, gaily. "I am not likely to be burthened with fine ladies like Porter in the days to come; as well learn the use of my own ten

fingers, now. Yes, the sky here must certainly be made of different material to what it is on the borders of Exmoor. I should say, Cora, that it rains more at Dulford than at any place in the universe?"

"We get forty more rainy days in the year than they do at Greenwich. Adolphus has calculated it all," says Cora, with a certain pride. "I am not sure I don't like rainy weather best," she adds, turning over the diamonds upon her fingers. "You get through so much on a rainy day."

"Get through"—what? More worsted work, more novels, or more eating and drinking? When I think of the winters I have 'got through' in Dulford——"

"It seems to me we were very contented last winter, Jet. There were five Christmas parties, and the practisings for Easter, and——"

"And the Reverend Adolphus Myers' visits. No doubt, the time was golden for some people."

"Adolphus used to call, most days, certainly. So did Mark Austen."

conscience-stricken thrill of regret.

“ We used to think, Aunt Gwendoline and I, that Mark and you did not dislike each other. But when the poor fellow came back, looking such a spectre, after his journey to Folkestone, one saw, of course, it was all over. He has passed the most splendid examination—have you heard ? ”

“ Through whom but you should I hear anything of Mark Austen ? ”

“ Through Mr. Biron, naturally. Lady Austen and Mr. Biron are friends, you say ? ”

“ I do not believe there is over much love between Miladi and her son,” says Jet, a little confusedly. “ Mark Austen has such a terrible temper ! Do you remember—even with us, how he used to contrive to pick quarrels ? ”

“ Mark Austen will make his way in the world, temper or no temper. Aldolphus

says he took the highest number of marks possible in physical science, and as to his mixed mathematics”

“ . . . I hear wheels,” exclaims Jet, flying, with a couple of bounds, across the room. “ Quick, Cora, quick! Oh, never mind looks!” This, as Cora is preparing to adjust her small person with mechanical precision before the glass. “ If we make haste we shall reach the portico before the omnibus arrives. A wrap? Child, what do wraps matter? Here, take this shawl. I am never cold. I . . . I . . . Ah, Cora, if you should not like each other, after all ! ”

Jet’s face is white with excitement. She flies along the corridor, then down the central staircase of the hotel, at a speed with which Cora, panting under such unwonted exertions, can scarce keep pace; finally, the entrance door of the hotel reached, she discovers that the wheels were those of a country patache, joggling, leisurely forth, with its load of country people, from the town of Esterel.

oranges, lemons, and oleanders which screens the left side of the portico. "Here, Laurence need not see us, at all, unless we choose it, and you will be able to form your first opinion of him without let or hindrance."

The whole entrance of the Paradis, including a short space of terrace on either side, is roofed in by glass. Statues—each supporting a lamp, and to whose white limbs the autumnal roses cling—are grouped around. Tall flowering grapes, aloes, and eucalyptus grow in profusion in the outer court.

Notwithstanding the lateness of the hour, several of the more inveterate hotel idlers linger upon the scene, still. Miss Wylie, properly attended by her maid, is "tatting," a yellow-backed novel on her knee, under one of the gaslights. The Scottish widow, her eyelids downcast, a heap of good little sad-covered books beside her, occupies an

immediately opposite corner. Major Brett trots to and fro, with a self-important air of expectancy, upon the steps.

Again there is the sound of approaching wheels, this time, for certain, along the Marseilles road. Jet feels herself turn hot and cold, by turns. Her breath comes short; she steals a trembling hand under Cora's arm, for support. In another minute the omnibus, piled, mountains high, with luggage, rattles noisily down the street, then swings, with one prodigious jerk, into the courtyard of the hotel.

The driver cracks his whip. Schmidt, secretary, and waiters pour forth from the house. Major Brett, with his crab-like little run, moves somewhat aside, inclined for the moment, probably, to play the part of spectator, rather than that of actor, in the comedy. The hall-porter opens the door of the omnibus, and on the instant descends a female, plain of feature, timid as to the exhibition of ankles, and who exchanges a furtive hand-shake with Karl, the good-looking second waiter of the Paradis—

screaming-noises, from some person or
persons, still in the interior of the vehicle.

And then there steps forth—Miladi !



CHAPTER XIV.

FIFINE.

“**M**IADI ! I give to Miladi well-komm,” cries Herr Schmidt, in his broken English, as he rushes up to support Lady Austen’s fingers with his arm.

Jet Conyngham bends eagerly forward, a presentiment, nearly akin to terror, contracting her heart.

“ Bonsoir, M. le Propriétaire,” begins Miladi, in a harsh, jarring, falsetto voice ; and, as she speaks, with a manner, I will not say foreign, but un-English, she gives a little imperial wave of her hand to the assembled crowd of servants. “ Ach Karl, mein freund,” in affected German accents,

not have to wait for dinner? È pronto il prauzo? Laurence," looking back across her shoulder into the omnibus, "will you have the goodness to search upon the floor of the voiture? I miss one of my gloves. And I believe you will find the umbrellas standing in the further corner."

Laurence!

Jet Conyngham's spirit sinks to zero.

"What—you do not see my glove!" Thus Miladi, petulantly, when another half minute has elapsed. "May I ask you to come out, and I will search for it myself. Vallance look—do you say? Oh, dear, no. Vallance has her arms full."

The Reverend Laurence Biron, upon this, makes his appearance; horribly pale, or so Jet imagines, and with some subtle change in his whole demeanour that it would be hard to define.

"I really do not think the glove can be there," he is beginning—

“The glove is there!” says Miladi, tartly.

Oh, the voice of this woman! Oh, her air of command! Jet Conyngham glances round at the knot of serving people, and detects a barely suppressed smile upon the face of each.

“Take my cloud.” Mr. Biron disappears beneath yards and yards of diaphonous knitted scarlet. “Hold, Fifine.” A ball of snapping white wool is deposited in Mr. Biron’s arms. “I will search, myself.”

But the Proprietor, Secretary, the head waiter, the subordinates, all contest for the honour of finding Miladi’s glove.

While they are thus engaged, Biron standing, helpless, with the shawl and lap-dog, Miladi giving a series of impatient stamps upon the pavement, little Major Brett comes forward with a run.

“Lady Austen—a thousand welcomes to the Paradis. You received my two last telegrams, I hope?”

“So, it *is* Lady Austen,” whispers Jet. “I shall never wonder again at Mark’s temper.”

Jet makes no reply.

“ You do not know if my son is in Esterel, M. le Secretaire,” goes on Miladi, pointedly turning her back upon Laurence Biron. “ He was to have met me here by appointment ; indeed, he should have arrived an hour ago by the afternoon train from Marseilles.”

No, the Secretary has not had the distinguished honour of receiving Miladi’s son. But there is yet the half-past seven Paris Express,—or it is possible M. Austen may have descended at some other hotel in the town ?

“ He has just passed the most glorious examination, Major Brett, the most glorious examination, has my son. India Civil Service. Commissioners of Roads and Forests. Mark came out first of ninety. I telegraphed, two days ago, inviting him to join me in the South before proceeding to Germany, where he will have to prosecute his studies for a year or more.”

Major Brett is profuse in good wishes and congratulations. "Talent—nothing like it nowadays. Talent is hereditary, my dear lady! All your really clever fellows have had gifted mothers."

Biron stands, moodily submitting to his burden, digesting, as best he may, the tidings that Lady Austen, with intentional abruptness, has conveyed to him.

For her to hold forth the olive-branch to young Mark is, Mr. Biron knows, a covert declaration of war against himself. How soon shall the rupture become open? How much has she heard of the truth respecting Jet Conyngham? What deadliest reprisals may she not, at this moment, have on hand?

"Fifine, ma mie, ma moutonne," says Miladi, taking the dog from Biron's arm as though he were a lackey. "We are tired after our journey, n'est ce pas, ma bibiche, and must have our tea. You would not believe, Major, how the dear creature looks to me for her five o'clock tea when she is tired. Alas! Separated, as circumstances

shall be obliged by your seeing that my baggage is right. Fourteen large pieces, two boxes belonging to Vallance, and the different wraps. Ma mignonne, mon amour, is she glad to get back to her own, own mistress!"

And caressing the dog, chattering, gesticulating, coquetting, Miladi trips, with girlish activity, up the stairs; little Major Brett by her side, Schmidt, Secretary, waiters, lady's maid, in attendance.

Biron looks after her for a moment, as if uncertain whether to remain or follow. Then he flings down the shawl upon one of the heaps of luggage close at hand, and makes his way off, by a side door, into the house.

The Miss Conynghams linger still in their place of concealment.

"And so Mark is coming to Esterel!" observes Cora. "Aunt Gwendoline was right! Aunt Gwen said she knew poor Mark would follow"

"What—what do you think of Laurence?"
interrupts Jet, eagerly.

But her voice is sobered.

The realities of the last three minutes have swept half the glory from her dreams, half the halo of romance from Mr. Laurence Biron.

"I think he seems well accustomed to carrying Lady Austen's lapdog," is Cora's answer.



CHAPTER XV.

A WOMAN-HATER'S WOES.

PRECISELY at this moment in the humblest Provençal inn of the old town, Miladi's “enfant cheri” is sitting down to dinner; one other Englishman—the melancholy looking Dr. Oldham, whom we last saw at Miss Wylie’s side in the Paradis—his companion.

No luxurious German-kept hotels for young Mark. Accustomed, for years, to shape his way of life in accordance with self-imposed poverty, Mark Austen, from habit and taste alike, shuns all the fine gentleman surroundings amidst which he was reared as a child.

Especially are the gilt and white mirror-

lined salons of monster hotels flavoured by recollections that he abhors.

It was in mirror-lined salons that, dressed in velvet and point lace, his yellow curls hanging about his shoulders, he was his mother's companion, as long as he remained at a picturesque age, and could make his exits and his entrances along wrth the Fifine of the minute ; an accessory, like a becoming curtain, or bouquet of bright flowers, to the well-painted picture, held up for the world's admiration, of Lady Austen herself.

It was in mirror-lined salons that, as a lad, keenly alive to the humiliation of his position, he was forced to make Mr. Laurence Biron's acquaintance, to look upon him as his future step-father—to be civil to him !

I repeat, no luxurious, German-kept hotels for Mark. His mother's telegram bade him join her at the Paradis on his arrival in Esterel, and he can forecast, pretty accurately, the amount of stucco and veneer, of Barmecidical repasts and exor-

what ground, after years of cruel estrangement, he stands, it is possible that he and his mother may stay under the same roof once more. Till then——

Till then, Mark descends and orders his dinner at the Petit St. Joseph, one of the quaint old French inns where travellers may count upon finding flagged floors, coarse table linen, a master who also acts as chef and waiter, excellent cooking, and civility. When will English people learn to do their travelling “with brains, sir !” When, es-chewing crimson velvet, retinues of servants, gilt, ormolu, and starvation, will they seek homely comfort in the Petit St. Josephs of the countries through which they pass !

Well, during the first half of the meal, talk languishes. The misogynist seems wrapt in gloomy reverie—possibly of Miss Wylie, and of the dangers from which he has newly escaped. Mark’s mind is filled

with eager speculations as to the future, speculations amidst which his chance of again coming across Jet Conyngham holds a foremost place. By the time, however, that they get to an excellently roasted poulet de Bresse, Doctor Oldham begins to thaw. Over dessert, and a well-kept bottle of Burgundy, he is expansive—young Mark listening carelessly, as a man may listen to the idle tongue of a bell, which to-morrow shall toll a death-knell over all the human happiness he possesses!

“I have spent the last two winters in Algeria, sir, and got on pretty well there. Found an hotel ladies did *not* frequent. There was the secret.” The doctor takes off his spectacles, and gazes with solemn, short-sighted eyes at the rudely daubed frescoes of saints and martyrs that adorn the white-washed walls. “This winter, Clarkson thought the climate of Esterel might do for me, and since the end of October, four horrible weeks, I have endured existence at the Hôtel Paradis. You know the place?”

"For a man travelling with relations, protected by his own party, it might be different. I am alone. Why do capitalists not build special hotels for solitary and unprotected men? Following some detestable rule of the establishment, they placed a lady at my right hand for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. At first my neighbour was a good old French *mère de famille*, who ate her food in silence and allowed me to do the same. This respectable woman, however, left, and was succeeded—" He gives an involuntary shudder at the remembrance—"was succeeded by an English person, with curls, with high spirits, with ridiculous infantine affectations, and who talked!"

The poor little woman-hater is solemnly, tragically in earnest. He passes his handkerchief over his forehead, puts on his spectacles again, and filling his glass to the brim with Burgundy, proceeds.

"At first, I humoured her; weakly think-

ing that she must, perforce, talk herself out ; that three or four days would see the evil abate. Sir, she got worse. She got intolerable, sir. Offered me to look over her journal—me to look over the record of any woman's follies ! Asked if I copied music, or would act showman at 'wax-works,' or help to organise a lawn tennis club ? I changed my place at table. She changed hers. I went down by the door. She went there, too. After dinner she would follow me about the salon with a go-bang board. I played, to avoid talking. Then I talked, to avoid playing. My meals, my evenings, alike, were made a terror to me. I believe a fortnight more of it would have driven me to suicide—on my soul, I do ! ”

“ But you have found courage to break away from this siren at last ? ” says Mark Austen.

“ Yes. I received an invitation yesterday, to an afternoon tea with music, and I packed my portmanteau and fled. Before I left the Paradis I heard they were going

out here I shall have no alternative but again to pack my portmanteau and move on. I know a little traveller's inn, outside Bordighera, to which ladies do not go. I believe I might feel safe there."

"Your first suggestion should be carried out," says Mark, not without a smile. "Hotels for the unprotected bachelor would answer, as a mere commercial speculation."

"Of course, there are men who appreciate petticoat tyranny; invalids who find the bore of illness lessened by hourly attentions, sympathies, consolations, and the like. Now, there is an invalid, a malade imaginaire, rather, staying at the Hôtel Paradis . . . what is his name? Carruthers, Carrington, Conyngham—that is it, Conyngham. An invalid, with a daughter—handsome, yellow-haired girl, who has thrown herself away upon the Reverend Laurence Biron. Well, sir, this Mr. Conyngham . . ."

The doctor branches forth into stories about the Scottish widow and her ministrations, stories about good little books, downcast eyelids, and water-gruel. And Mark, with his heart on fire, listens in silence! A minute later, "I believe you mentioned the name of Laurence Biron?" he observes quietly. "Is Laurence Biron staying at the Hôtel Paradis?"

His manner is reserved, his tone indifferent; but, as he speaks, Mark Austen rises from the table; he stands, his face in shadow, and gazes down into the flames that dart and crackle from the branches of olive-wood on the hearth.

A handsome, yellow-haired girl, who has thrown herself away upon Laurence Biron. . . . Aye, but there must be some mistake! It is not—not Jet's name that has thus become common on men's tongues! Fate, in its mood of sharpest irony, can never have decreed that Laurence Biron, the man who, from another cause, has poisoned his whole young life, should now be his successful rival with the woman he loves!

know his name. I do not know Mr. Biron, personally."

This is strictly true. Were young Mark to meet the Reverend Laurence Biron on the pavement in Paris, London, Florence, he would not lift his hat to him.

" You will soon know him, by sight, at least, if you make any stay in Esterel. The Reverend Laurence Biron does not hide his light under a bushel. Equally, as a matter of course, your eyes will become familiar with the charms of Miss Jet Conyng-ham."

Mark turns round with a swing. He glares fiercely down on the poor doctor, innocently peeling his walnuts, and babbling, as men with somewhat weak heads are apt to do, under the influence of strong wine.

" The pair may be seen together, morning, noon, and night, and at all times

untroubled by a chaperon. Mr. Conyngham is too taken up with sentimental friendship and fancied illness to look after his daughter—indeed, as far as that goes, I dare say, like most daughters of the period, she is pretty well able to take care of herself."

"And you intend to hint, I assume," interrupts Mark Austen, under his breath, "that Mr. Biron and and Miss Conyngham are lovers—engaged to be married?"

Doctor Oldham hesitates. "The people at the Hôtel Paradis are all of them strangers to you?" he asks, a little uncertainly.

"Strangers? Yes, of course. *Strangers*," Mark replies, with moody emphasis.

"Then I am safe in telling you what I know to be the fact as regards Mr. Laurence Biron's prospects. I do not like the man, you understand. Worst pattern of a parson I ever came across. But that is a matter of personal taste. Young ladies do like him, Miss Jet Conyngham especially, and he—likes the thought of Miss Jet Conyng-

stupefied; some rapid intuition shadowing forth to him the fatal game of cross purposes in which Jet has played the part at once of heroine and victim.

"A good round sum, is it not? No bad prize for a Mr. Laurence Biron to have picked up? At first, when I heard the thing spoken of, I disbelieved it, as I disbelieved everything in the Hôtel Paradis, on principle. Heiresses of nineteen do not, in this generation, fall over head and ears in love with penniless adventurers, black-coated or otherwise. But I was mistaken. Miss Jet Conyngham has displayed the generic wrongheadedness and perversity of her sex."

At this point, Mark, it is obvious, should ask questions. He speaks not a word; stands blankly staring, with a far-off expression, at the fire; is in truth morally stunned, although far from the stage of insensibility at which no fresh pain can be experienced.

"Four or five days ago they got up an afternoon expedition to Tamaris, a well-named donkey expedition, consisting of half the visitors at the hotel. I was one of them! Sir, I detest these out-of-door assemblages. I am obliged to winter in the south, to give up London, and my profession, and everything else that makes life worth living. That is bad enough, without having the very face of nature spoilt for me, the very woods and mountains vulgarized by foolish gushes of mock enthusiasm, by the presence of picnic baskets, sketch-books, and parasols. However, at the eleventh hour, I went—just as I did everything else at the grand Hôtel Paradis—from compulsion. The weather was fine, I had a supply of cigars in my pocket—when I was once in the forests I contrived to shake myself free from from the person at whose side I had the unhappiness to find myself. What became of the expedition I cannot tell you. Two members of it I lighted upon, suddenly, at a latish hour in the afternoon, in a remote

continues rigidly silent. But Doctor Oldham, misogynist though he be, as great a newsmonger, in his way, as Major Brett, will not be baulked of telling his little bit of scandal by any want of interest on the part of his listener.

“ I am painfully near-sighted, as you may have remarked, and I was within a dozen paces of Mr. Biron and his companion before I awoke to my position. Happily for myself, the underwood at that part of the forest was thick, and I was able to beat a hasty retreat, unnoticed. You asked me if any engagement of marriage exists between them. I hesitated before giving you an answer. What I *saw*, in spite of my wish to see nothing, was Miss Jet Conyngham throw her arms around Laurence Biron’s neck—and——”

“ It is false—false as——”

And Mark Austen’s face turns livid to the very lips.

"False!" exclaims the little doctor, start-up with an instinctive backward movement in the direction of the door.

"Sir, I must ask you to pardon me!" cries poor Mark; once more remembering his position, the madness of constituting himself Jet's champion. "I owe you every apology," he adds, "but I was occupied with my own thoughts rather than with your words. The truth is, I have been travelling for the last two nights, and my head is confused. I I must try if fresh air will not restore me to my senses."

He walks quickly out through the time-blackened archway of the Petit St. Joseph, walks quickly through the narrow, winding lanes of Esterel proper. Outside one or two palm-shaded cafés are knots of citizens enjoying their nightly dissipation of sugar-water and cigarettes. Some muleteers, coming home late from the mountains, whistle, with light hearts and free, as they pass along. The world, one miserable human creature excepted, is in spirits.

rose-draped statues, the gas-illumined letters of the Grand Hôtel Paradis.

The venetians of the dining-room are unclosed, and a flood of brilliant light pours into the courtyard. Not a servant of the hotel is abroad. Even old Hans, the concierge, dreams of the Vaterland, his head upon his breast, in the most comfortable corner of the portico. Mark steps within shadow of the house, moves silently to the nearest window, and sees—Jet ! Jet, not a dozen yards away from him, and all unconscious whose eyes watch her in jealous wretchedness from the outside darkness.

She is dressed in white (as Biron likes best to see her), with delicate natural flowers gleaming, like snow, in her hair and at her breast. Her cheeks are flushed ; her whole face is lit up, radiant with excitement. Mr. Biron, from his place on the opposite side of the table, is leaning forward and addressing her.

"The handsome, yellow-haired girl who has thrown herself away on Laurence Biron."

When Mark heard those words, carelessly uttered, they stabbed him to the quick. Judge if his wound is healed by this palpable, living confirmation of their truth!



CHAPTER XVI.

ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA.

N Arles head-dress ; pearl-powder, not too artistically showered over a brick-dust coloured skin ; trailing velvet skirts ; a lap-dog supported on arms to which all the bismuth, all the bracelets in the world can never restore the look of youth. . . . Such elements make up the jarring whole that sweeps with an air into the salon of the Grand Hôtel Paradis on this first evening of Mr. Laurence Biron's return to Esterel.

“ Miladi ! ” goes from mouth to mouth—for 'tis her first public appearance ; Lady Austen, with her Fifine, dined in the privacy of her own apartments. And then, as if by

common impulse, all eyes are turned in the direction of Jet Conyngham.

If the situation be not correctly understood in detail, its general bearings are sufficiently well guessed at for the dramatic interest to be keen. Most of the people present know that Laurence Biron's marriage with Lady Austen has been a contingency speculated on for years. Every one of them, during the past fortnight, has seen him, openly and devotedly, Jet's slave.

"Subjugated by those fine eyes of hers, or by the beaux yeux de sa cassette?" In terms like these little Major Brett answers the dozen whispered inquiries that beset him. "Ah, my dear madam, this is a question for the future. Impossible to pronounce a moral while the fable is incomplete. Impossible to judge of motive until we read the last chapter of the story."

Jet, whatever secret aching may be at her heart, bears herself bravely.

"I think I ought to have been warned," she remarks—Miladi, with Lady Macbeth mien, having swept past the window within

direct, from Avignon to Florence, or has it been carefully stored away in your possession till to-night?"

"If you are strong, be merciful," is Biron's answer. "I told you at the time (you were looking 'beautiful by proxy,' if you remember!) that the Arles coiffure was to be worn by . . . well, by a lady no longer in the first giddy heyday of youth."

"I am not so sure on the score of giddiness," says Jet, maliciously. "There seems to be a want of balance, a certain crazy, tottering look about the whole edifice, that, to me, is alarming. Do you not think you ought to be at hand, sir, just in case of any sudden downfall?"

Cora, upon this, joins in, with the usual blunt directness, characteristic of her type, the want of tact that renders unimaginative people the terrible children of society.

"Mark Austen and his mother are as like

as two people can be, Jet; when first Miladi got down from the omnibus I did not see it, but now I recognise Mark in every feature."

"When first Miladi got down from the omnibus!" repeats Biron, blankly.

He is a man by no means fond of children, terrible, or otherwise. He feels, although, as yet, he has scarce exchanged a dozen sentences with her, that he is not fond of his future sister-in-law. Something in the tone of Cora's steady voice, in the gaze of her round, black unchanging eyes at once irritates and embarrasses him.

"Ah, I see we may as well make a clear confession," cries Jet, sensitive, as iodine to light, to every expression of his face. "Cora has never kept a secret for more than half an hour in her life, and is too old to mend her ways now. We—we ran down to see the omnibus arrive from Salon. Of course I expected no one but you, sir, and we stood behind the screen of plants in the portico, and——"

"It was very diverting, indeed," proceeds Cora, as Jet hesitates; "I felt as if I was

BIRON'S TEMPTERS.

"I need not ask if I have been missed, if you have been dull during my absence?" he remarks to Jet, later on in the evening. "Your sister's charming flow of spirits must be an effectual safeguard against ennui."

"I have missed you every minute of the time, missed you, in spite of my joy at seeing Cora," Jet answers, simply. "As to ennui guess how we amused, or tried to amuse ourselves, yesterday night, when all the rest of the world was sound asleep?"

"Not in pulling my character to pieces, I trust?"

"In telling your fortune, Mr. Biron. I cut the cards for you, and Cora made out their meaning. Oh, you may smile! Cora has *the gift*. It was born with her. I do not like to think how near the truth Cora's soothsayings come."

"Well, is fortune favourable to me, or the reverse?" says Biron, and he smiles,

but uneasily. "Cora's predictions included the usual dark woman and fair man, and letter from over the sea, of course?"

"Cora told exactly what you had been doing, yesterday, in Nice. During the first part of the day your mind was set on money."

"Perfectly, absolutely, true," Mr. Biron confesses. Upon what day, he adds, mentally, and at what hour is his mind not set on money! "Afterwards?"

"Who," says Jet, turning her eyes full upon her lover, "who was the lady you thought of and watched during the evening? She was blonde, blonder than I am, *fearfully pretty*, and Cora declared, though for my part I refused to believe it, that you made her a present?"

Just for a moment Mr. Biron pauses. Then, "Cora's clairvoyance is beyond a jest, my love," he remarks gravely. They are so placed as to be out of reach of curious ears, and Cora, for a space, has left them alone. "If your sister can tell fortunes after this fashion she must be a little witch, and I

...., um, um there was some one.
Jet Conyngham's foolish heart beats, her
lips tremble.

"There was—Rose Pinson, a French
dancer, whom I remember, years ago, in
Paris. I felt so lonely without you, child,
that I spent my evening at the theatre."

"Oh, pray go on!"

"And from sheer idleness, threw a
bouquet of flowers at Mademoiselle Pinson's
feet. Now, is Cora a witch?"

"I am glad I know the worst," and Jet's
breast heaves a big sigh of relief. "I
Laurence," she exclaims with sudden ear-
nestness, "I hope to Heaven I am not
going to be jealous!"

"I hope not, most devoutly," he replies,
"jealousy, my dear child—I speak from
knowledge—is the ugliest vice by which a
woman can be deformed. If it is impossible,
as some people say, for love to exist without
it, I, for one, would far sooner exist without
love."

"I make my mind up. From this hour forth I will never again be jealous while I live. Throw bouquets to Mademoiselle Pinson! Take mysterious railway journeys with Lady Austen! I shall be silent, a Grizelda of resignation, through it all."

"Mysterious railway journeys? I first, to my astonishment, saw Lady Austen at Salon Station. From Salon Station I drove with her to Esterel—in dead silence! Lady Austen, in a good temper has—well, has some admirable qualities. Lady Austen, in her present state of mind, is—the devil."

The word seems to escape him, involuntarily. Scarcely is it uttered when Miladi, her lap-dog reposing on her arms, sails slowly across the room and stands confronting him.

Fifine, recognising her enemy, gives a vicious snap. Little Major Brett (with whom Lady Austen has been just conversing in animated whispers) glances round him, in some sort as an artist might do if seeking to call the world's attention to his work.

Never a word does she utter.

Well, Reader, for half a minute's space Jet feels the crisis to be tragical, exceedingly ; then, veering round, "as 'tis her nature to," the girl sees it in its farcial outside aspect, and raises her handkerchief to her lips.

Never was unwise impulse more unwisely yielded to. Lady Austen is totally without the sense of humour, herself. Would she wear that Arles head-dress, would she dizen herself with bismuth, rouge, and pearl powder, had she one grain of humour ? She can in nowise pardon the possession of it by others. Laugh at her, and, if she be not your enemy beforehand, it will be war to the knife between you and Miladi for ever after.

"Good evening to you, Mr. Biron—Fifine, ma charmante, keep quiet ! Mr. Biron is a friend—you hear, charmante, *a friend!* I

have come to solicit a favour," this with a little theatrical downward inclination of the head, "an introduction to Miss Jet Conyngham."

Her voice, considering that it is Lady Austen's voice, is suave; her manner amiable.

Jet Conyngham repents her of her levity.

After all, what are Miladi's crimes, real or suspected? The wish to appear youthful in Laurence Biron's eyes, the caring for Laurence Biron absurdly, but too well. If Lady Austen feel bitterly towards herself, Jet Conyngham, is there matter for wonder? Should not generosity, delicacy, make her look with pity upon this woman, old enough to be her grandmother, of whom she may have been, unwittingly, the successful rival?

Mr. Biron introduces the two ladies with what grace he may. He waits, in an agony of expectation, for Lady Austen's first words.

She is quite capable, as he has proved ere this, of disgracing him before a salon full of people. Probably it is her intention to dis-

Sauve au vu du manuscrit :

But Lady Austen's disposition—could one forget the expression of her eyes, her lips—is honey sweet.

“ You are making some stay in Esterel, my dear ? So your papa tells me. I have just been renewing my old acquaintance with your papa. We have known Mr. Conyngham for ages—I should think before this young lady left off pinafores, Laurence ? ”

“ It is certainly some years since I first had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Conyngham,” stammers Laurence Biron.

“ And you have been exploring the woods, I hear, under Mr. Biron’s chaperonage. You could find no one better qualified as a guide. I suppose there is not an excursion within ten miles of Esterel that we have not taken, Laurence ? Alas,

“ ‘ Nous n’irons plus aux bois
Les lauriers sont coupés.’ ”

Mr. Biron’s face has grown sickly white.

Her mode of attack is not the one on which he counted, yet it is none the less deadly. Nay, as the unknown has ever more terrors for us than the known, it seems to him that Lady Austen quiet, dignified, quoting sentimental verse, is more to be feared, in very truth, than Lady Austen loud and reckless.

Miladi sees what impression she has produced on him—about Jet she neither recks nor cares—and the corners of her mouth tighten.

“ You and your half-sister do not resemble each other, Miss Jet Conyngham. The young lady who leans her arm against Mr. Conyngham’s chair is your sister? ”

“ My sister, Cora,” answers Jet. “ No, we are as different as possible, are we not? People tell me I am like papa, and Cora—— ”

“ Is the living image of her mother,” remarks Miladi, quickly. “ I remember your father’s first wife as she looked upon her wedding morning—a good many more years ago than I care to count! I have been a

art of using truth as a vehicle for falsehood. “ And as I am an old woman now, and have a faithful memory—a faithful memory, Mr. Biron—there are few things connected with the ‘lost tribes’ of the Peninsula during the last five and twenty years, that are unknown to me.”

“ I—I was not aware that you and papa had been acquainted so long,” says Jet, but with hesitation. She feels this subject of ages and dates to be a perilous one.

“ We were not acquainted, personally, until later on. Your papa’s marriage was an event much talked of, and I went, with half Florence, to the English chapel to witness it. Alas, alas !

“ ‘ Tempora mutantur, et nos mutamur in illis.’

You, my dear, are too young to have begun regretting time’s flight.”

As Lady Austen speaks, the first notes of one of Moore’s most delicious melodies are

struck on the piano. A minute later, and a soprano voice, sweet, full, *Irish*, fills the whole vast salon with its music.

The performer is an amateur, whose renown, as a singer of ballads, is European. Not by the lips of any artiste in London could the song be rendered with higher finish, with pathos more delicate and subtle.

Miladi, who, if the telling of her age depended on it, could scarce distinguish a requiem from a polka, puts herself in an attitude and endures it; much as she might endure any excellence that should turn away attention from herself.

Laurence Biron, one of whose saving graces is a love for music, stands, spell-bound.

“Give me back, give me back, the wild freshness of morning!”

At the conclusion of the verse, he turns, and looks at Jet.

The girl’s whole countenance is aglow with keenly roused feeling; her lips are parted, her eyes moist.

To the last hour of his life Mr. Biron will

work to destroy!

"Fifine, mon unique amour," cries Miladi, when the song is over, holding up the dog (as, in his infant days, she, certainly, never upheld poor Mark) to her face. "We are tired after our journey, and must seek repose and meditation, ma mie, must we not? Miss Jet Conyngham most pleased and honoured to have made your acquaintance." Dropping a stately reverence, but never extending her hand for Jet's acceptance. "Mr. Biron, I wish you a very good night."

And having so spoken, the eyes of every one riveted upon her departure as upon her advent, she walks, with the step and gait of a transpontine Cleopatra, across the salon.

Biron, hapless Antony of the performance, follows. He holds open the door for Lady Austen to pass out.

"I have a trifling bit of news to tell you," she remarks, in a whisper that he knows, overwell. "You will leave Miss Conyngham's side. You will come to my apartment at once."

And then, in a voice hoarse, all but incoherent, with passion, she utters one other word, aloud—

"Vendetta!"



CHAPTER XVII.

IN MILADI'S CHAMBER.

 ONE are French phrases, theatrical affectations; gone is Fine. Thunder-showers of angry tears have washed the pearl-powder down Lady Austen's cheeks. Ribbons, brooches, bracelets, lie in a heap upon the table. The *woman*, tragedy-queen no longer, stript of meretricious adornment, remains. A commonplace virago, pacing her apartment with angry steps; jealousy burning fiercely at her heart; wounded vanity sharpening, beforehand, the reproaches with which she is about to assail her recreant lover.

A commonplace virago: unlovely exter-

nally, unlovely of soul: yet with justice, with right, indubitably on her side.

Right! There is the cause that held Laurence Biron silent during their five-mile drive from Salon, there the cause that makes him shrink, cowardly, from confronting her now.

Villains cast in the true heroic mould should be above, or beneath, caring for these abstract questions; prepared consistently to follow the line of action chalked out for them by their own desires.

The foundations of Mr. Biron's character are laid in sand.

Essentially weak, beneath all his outward varnish of stoicism, Laurence Biron is a man for ever to seize the surface good of the moment and to repent him of having seized it at the next; a man, as we have seen before, who even poses in touching little moral attitudes, with no other audience than his own consciousness!

During any number of years past, he has been Lady Austen's quasi-suitor, so far seriously affianced as to be able, with some

moment,—just as the winning (perchance breaking) Jet Conyngham's fresh heart has been the “best thing” now. He cannot, as a tougher-fibred, less self-conscious scoundrel might, cast the connection aside, boldly.

Walking along the corridor which leads to Miladi's apartments, certain shaky sensations about his knees make him realise, forcibly, through what kind of ordeal criminals must pass on their way to the scaffold. A tell-tale moisture gathers continually on his forehead, his handsome face is blanched to a most unhandsome sallowness.

He knocks. The tone in which Miladi bids him “Come in” is not one calculated to restore his valour. But it is too late, now, for retreat or vacillation. He enters; closes the door behind him; advances to the centre of the room.

Lady Austen and the Reverend Laurence Biron stand face to face.



"You have found courage to come, then?" This is her greeting of him. "You have found courage to come, to look me in the eyes, after your conduct to-night?"

"You desired to see me," he answers somewhat doggedly. How but with doggedness shall a man meet such a woman's violence? "And I am here."

"You are here—yes! Perhaps you would like to know what sort of figure you cut in my sight?"

Mr. Biron expresses no curiosity on the subject. He has walked up to the hearth, and stands there, his back turned towards the fire. His eyes are fixed on a mirror at the further end of the apartment; a mirror so hung as to display to him the image of his own white face during the whole continuance of the interview.

"I have never had a very high opinion of you, mon ami, at the best of times."

"I have never had a very high opinion of myself, Lady Austen, of myself, or of my position."

"But as I saw you to-night, at the side

“If it is to go through scenes, to listen to recriminations of this kind, that——”

So he is beginning, in the old tone of mastery which, sooner or later, he has always managed to reach in the course of their hottest quarrels. But Lady Austen cuts him short; not without a certain genuine dignity.

“ You are here to listen to whatever I choose to say, Mr. Biron, and take my word for it you will leave this room a wiser man by far than you entered it. Recriminations —scenes! No. We are past all that kind of weakness, I should hope. A point or two past it.”

Miladi stops in her walk—for up to this moment she has continued to pace restlessly to and fro, as she had done before his entrance. She advances to him; lays a hand upon his arm.

“ Laurence,” she says, in a voice so

softened that, for a second, it takes him aback. "I talked of my Vendetta awhile since. I longed for it! And yet now—now that Vendetta is so close, I am sorry for you."

Mr. Biron does not reply.

"Sorry for you, to a degree impossible for you to guess at yet. Do you," the words evidently leave her lips with an effort, "do you *care* for this Miss in-her-teens, this child, Jet Conyngham?"

"Lady Austen——"

"I want an answer, a true one, if it is possible for you to speak the truth. Do you care for her?"

"I admire Miss Jet Conyngham, immensely. Most men would do the same."

"That is a matter of opinion; no answer, whatever, to my question. Is it admiration for her that has prevented you from writing to me during the past fortnight? Admiration that has kept you in Esterel? Admiration that made you slight, trample upon me—a roomful of people present to witness the insult—as you did to-night?"

sult, actual, implied, shadowed, have I offered you?"

"You have offered me the insult of neglect, sir! Neglect, gross, and intentional. Do you think, when I entered the room, I did not see you, laughing, whispering, with Miss Conyngham, making me, I have no doubt, the subject of your jests? Do you think I did not feel it when, as the evening wore on, you never went through the empty form, even, of coming near me. You have told me sometimes that my master passion is vanity. Allowed. How must my vanity, my master passion, have smarted under your treatment to-night?"

Biron casts about in his thoughts for an efficient means of self-defence. Finding none, he remarks, somewhat weakly, and never lifting his eyes in the direction of Miladi's face, that he should not suppose any one in the salon of the Hôtel Paradis paid much heed to his actions.

But Lady Austen cuts him short.

"The whole of the people in that salon paid heed to you, Mr. Biron. The K—s, the L—s." Rapidly she names the different inmates of the hotel. "Major Brett, Frederick Conyngham, himself. . . . Are we not known personally, or by repute, to every English person in the house?"

"*Known*, indeed!" repeats Laurence Biron, almost with a groan.

"Do you suppose," old woman though she be, a flush rises on Miladi's cheek; her eyes droop—"do you suppose that my feelings, my right, at least to your outward respect, are not understood?"

Mr. Biron fidgets about uneasily; he passes his hand over his forehead.

"You are making me thoroughly unhappy by all these reproaches, Helena, and I really fail to see that you are doing any good to yourself. It was inevitable; actually inevitable," he repeats, steeling himself to strike a decisive blow, "that our relations towards each other must alter, as time wore on."

inflicted bodily pain.

"Inevitable that our relations must alter! I can understand an honourable man being forced to speak like this—under some circumstances. Hardly in yours. If you felt sure, beforehand, of your own faithlessness, I wonder you could accept could incur such solid money obligations as those you have incurred towards me."

It is not a generous speech. With love—well, no! we will not say with love lying bleeding—but with vanity newly stabbed, with jealous passion at white heat, it is to be feared that few women of Lady Austen's type would show very fine or delicate generosity. One thing is certain. Her reply, unworthy though it be, is on a moral level no lower than the taunt that called it forth.

"I am your debtor, to an extent that makes me blush," says Laurence Biron, coldly. "Still, if anything could lighten

the uneasy load of my obligation, it would be for your lips to remind me of it, in such a moment as this. For every hundred pounds that you have ever been good enough to lend me, Lady Austen, you have, I think, my note of hand——”

“*Your note of hand!*”

Miladi laughs; a laugh not pleasant to hear.

“And before very long I shall be in a position to repay you all. By Heaven,” exclaims Biron, drawing himself up as though he already felt himself free from the chains that shackle him, “that first hour of liberty will be the sweetest one I have tasted for a good many years.”

Lady Austen looks at him, fixedly.

“You will be in a position, soon, to repay your debts—debts, if you force me into calling a spade a spade (and Roland a fripon), that can no longer be reckoned by hundreds! I am glad to hear it. From rumours that had reached me during the last ten days, I feared that bankruptcy, worse, even than all that went before, awaited you in the future. Laurence,” after

“ If you choose to make it so. I know of no cause or just impediment to stand in the way of our continuing friends.”

“ You see, I have reasons for wishing to be explicit. Mark will be with me to-morrow ; he is probably in Esterel at this moment. I have felt it my duty, standing alone, as I stand now, to send for the boy. I shall have to speak to him of my affairs, and in pretty plain language.”

It seems to Mr. Biron that her tone implies a threat ; and his spirit rises.

“ Your son, Mark, has hated me always, Lady Austen. You talk of insult ! What insult have I not, for your sake, put up with from Mark ? Why, the last time I saw him—— ”

“ All that is as well left alone—buried in the past ; I wish to deal with things that concern me nearly in the present. Is Mark to be told, or not, that you have broken your faith to me ? ”

The question is uttered with a gasp. Miladi sinks down into the nearest chair. She covers her face over with her thin, jewelled hands.

Mr. Biron's "æsthetic conscience" remains untouched, his sensibility hard as the nether mill-stone! He has been going through scenes of a like nature during a course of years, it must be remembered; knows Lady Austen and her histrionic capabilities to a shade.

How should he guess that for once the clever actress is merged in the passionate woman, how believe that under so much paint and pearl-powder, moral as well as physical, there beats a heart—frivolous if you will, vain, selfish; but still a *heart*, loving him with all the love it has to give, bleeding at every pore over his infidelity!

"Mark will be only too rejoiced to hear that you are rid of me, at last."

She lifts her face; she looks at him with a steadfast, pitiful earnestness.

"Rid of you! I understand—I understand. And the world at large a

as this ? ”

“ I am at a loss to know what you allude to when you use the term ‘ esclandre.’ ”

“ I allude to your marriage with Miss Jet Conyngham. I allude to your treachery to me. Have I not given up money, friends, the affection of those nearest and dearest to me, for your sake, sir ? Have I not braved the reproaches of society ? ”

Biron turns round upon her, a smile—harder for Miladi to bear than any outburst of violence—upon his lips.

“ My dear Lady Austen !—let us keep ourselves, please, within the regions of common sense ! Speak of money, and I answer, as I did just now, that I look forward with thankfulness to the approaching hour in which I shall be able to repay my obligations. Romantic regrets about ‘ society,’ speculations as to ‘ the world,’ thinking one thing or another, in the case of people of our age, are—excuse me for my frankness—absolutely too ridiculous ! ”

It is a speech over the remembrance of which the Reverend Laurence Biron will, I doubt not, be made to smart throughout the remainder of his natural life.

Miladi starts up, lightning quick; she stands looking at him—stands, with fury gleaming in her eyes, with hands clenched, with swelling veins.

“Age! Well, I have sunk low, indeed. I have received the last indignity you had it in your power to offer—age!” In the whole English language there is, probably, no other word that Lady Austen could pronounce with such loathing emphasis. “This, indeed, sets me free from all promises, this ends the friendship of years, fitly. Oh, sir, there is something yet for you to hear before you go.” For Biron, at his first chance of liberty, has made a movement in the direction of the door. “I asked you, awhile since, if you cared, seriously, for this girl to whom you have engaged yourself, this Miss Jet Conyngham. I repeat my question now.”

“It is a question you have no right whatever to ask, Lady Austen; but, as you

always feel sure of affection accompanying men's choice. But, of course, in the present case, there can be small doubt as to the disinterestedness of all parties. You—well, Laurence, you are never likely to be burthened with this world's goods. Jet Conyngham is a pauper."

"Lady Austen"

"Except so far as Mr. Conyngham, or, perhaps, the sister, may choose to make her some small allowance."

"You—you are labouring under a gross mistake," he articulates slowly, with half-drawn breath.

"Mistake? oh, not the slightest. You remember a letter I wrote you last month? It met you at Avignon—a letter commissioning you to send me this very head-dress I am wearing to-night. I told you in it about Mr. Conyngham's coming to Esterel with his daughter, the creole, the heiress.

Well, when I heard of you, afterwards—you see, these little historiettes make to themselves wings—heard how you were paying your attentions to ‘the rich Miss Conyngham,’ I could not help feeling that, perhaps, I had myself to thank for your falseness. Judge of my surprise this evening, to find you, Laurence Biron, caught by a pink-and-white face at last; romantically, over head and ears in love, *not* with Cora Conyngham, the heiress, but with her half-sister Jet, the daughter of a penniless Boston beauty, a girl without a farthing.”

Laurence Biron stands like a man petrified; incredulous, as yet, of that which has befallen him, and still with a hundred trivial incidents, a hundred careless words of Jet’s rushing back upon his memory, and confirming the truth which it is worse than ruin for him to believe.

Lady Austen rings the bell twice; then, with a yawn, gathers up the heap of trinkets from the table.

“ You will forgive me for summoning Vallance, I know, but I am really dying of

Cora Conyngham, the heiress, the sister of your fiancée. Major Brett knows all about Cora Conyngham's money, recollects the mother's marriage, indeed ; as I do myself. Forty thousand pounds on her twenty-third birthday—little Brett had it from Mr. Conyngham, himself—and engaged to an obscure country clergyman, with a Devonshire living of three hundred a year. 'Tis difficult to realise, no doubt, but such is the situation, mon cher. Such are the inequalities of Fate."

Not a sound escapes Laurence Biron's set lips. Already, in this minute's space, the shipwreck of his hopes seems to have become old to him. Difficult to realise? Nay. Happiness, not pain, requires time ere we can grow familiar with it. The fact hard of realisation to Laurence Biron is that, one half-hour ago he was Jet's lover, freed from Lady Austen's yoke, with

peace, independence, wealth, every fairest crown of human life lying before him in a golden future !

A discreet lady's-maid tap comes at the door.

"In two seconds, Vallance," cries out Miladi, pleasantly. "Carry Fifine on at once. I shall follow immediately."

Then, turning to the Reverend Laurence Biron ere she quits the room, she drops him a low courtesy.

"Our interview began stormily enough, mon ami, but it ends—ha, ha—excuse me, I cannot help a sense of diversion—in comedy, ha ha, a comedy of errors! You calculated shrewdly, Laurence, made the best of your time, and of your fascinations, and only fell into one trifling mistake—that of losing your heart to the wrong sister. A rivederla."

And sending him a kiss from her finger-tips, in playful token of farewell, Lady Austen disappears.

She has told her bit of trifling news, he has had her Vendetta in good earnest.

CHAPTER XVIII.

JUST A TOUCH OF ROUGE !

VENDETTA ! The taste is good in
Lady Austen's mouth ; sweet is
the sleep that follows, aye, and
visited by flattering dreams.

Then comes reaction ; the cold grey hour
of moral indigestion ; the dawning of a new
day. Where is her triumph now ? With
what zest can she look forward to witnessing
Biron's ruin ? What joy is there in knowing
that she and Biron have broken with each
other irrevocably ?

Miladi pushes back her mosquito curtains,
takes a pocket glass—to women of her type
the one faithful friend—from the table beside
her bed, and by such light as the expiring

night-lamp, the November morning, yield, studies her own face carefully.

It is a face whose natural charm half a century has swept away, a face upon which unbridled temper, late hours, cosmetics—Lady Austen's enemies might perchance add stimulants—have left their unmistakable seal, the face of an old woman !

This last fact Miladi might surely have known any time during the past dozen years or more, and still, under the glamour of Biron's constant companionship, she has never had it positively, cruelly, brought home to her till this moment.

An old woman. In fancy she can see herself wandering about Europe, with a maid and lap-dog, or virtuously keeping house for her son in a German university town ; later on, perhaps sinking in Bath or Cheltenham, to whist, knitting-needles, and bazaars. She, Lady Austen (with her adjuncts), one of the celebrities of Italy, sinking to whist, knitting-needles, and bazaars !

During her journey from Florence, yester-

humiliation aside. She would find her false lover upon the eve of marrying a richer bride, would denounce him publicly, as traitorous and forsworn, and have not exactly the censorious, straitlaced world it might be, but a very picturesque minority of men and women—of men more especially—upon her side.

This was the high-coloured sketch dashed in by Miladi's imagination. In reality, she finds—what? Laurence Biron in love, *in love* with a handsome penniless girl of nineteen; herself, no interesting victim sacrificed by the mercenary fickle-heartedness of man, but simply the ridiculous duenna of whose pretensions, of whose jealousy all operas, comedies, and novels make a jest.

What, she asks herself with a shiver, what will life be from this day forth and for ever more without Biron?

To women neither vain nor frivolous, the

day on which good-bye must definitely be spoken to youth is a dreary one. Still it comes in its appointed course. Though history, in the main, repeats itself, the legend of "Ninon de l'Enclos" remains unique. / ~
Lady Austen is a living anachronism; by a whimsical combination of accidents, has breathed, ever since she first made Biron's acquaintance, in an atmosphere just fifteen or twenty years too young for her.

The world, so she flatters herself, has forgotten Angelina's wrinkles in remembering the age and handsome person of her Edwin,—for, lacking even a rudimentary sense of humour, Lady Austen reflects not that it is possible to be notorious through sheer absurdity! Entering a concert-room or theatre on Biron's arm, riding on horseback in public places with Biron for her cavalier, she knows, yes, although her half century of existence be well struck, that she is still "talked of." . . . With a shrug of the shoulders by some; with ill-suppressed smiles by others? No matter. . . . "Talked of."

been that men regard her as a kind of second Guiccioli.

And now, all is over. The inevitable change in their relations has come ; Biron, by her own lips, is set free ; Mark summoned —that thought of Mark, perhaps, yields the sharpest sting of all—Mark summoned to be witness of their separation.

A bad time of it has Vallance, when she carries in her mistress's chocolate, and the last little scandals of the Hôtel Paradis. A bad time has Fifine when she attempts to take her wonted place beside Miladi's dressing-table for her breakfast of cream and maccaroons.

Lady Austen is in no humour for servants'-hall gossip, or lap-dog caresses. Lady Austen is in no humour for anything !

Anticipating I know not what series of dramatic tableaux, in which millinery details might fitly play a part, the poor soul has brought with her a dozen boxes or more of

theatrical property; relays of morning robes, evening dresses, coiffures, perukes. The sight of these, her war plumes, as they lie half unpacked about the chamber, gives the last finishing touch to her sense of failure, of abandonment.

What need, in the pass to which she has come, of longer fighting against the enemy, time? Time has conquered her. As well bow to the inevitable, accept the blank monotonous vista of days that lies before her, without a struggle. Butterfly-tinted wrappers, head-dresses of this reign or of that? No; Miladi will have none of them. She will wear black; will wear her own hair, plainly braided; has migraine, palpitation of the heart; means to receive no visitors, unless, of course, Mr. Mark should arrive this morning. Then, when she stands before the mirror in black, and with her own hair plainly braided, she begins to weep—yes, Reader, to weep, pity her, or laugh at her, as you will—at the piteous image presented to her.

Old? Why, she looks fifteen, twenty

me my dresses. A *mother's heart* must put selfish weakness aside, in a moment like this."

And the dresses are shown her. White, mauve, pink—the costly Paris confections are brought forth successively, by the faithful hands of Vallance (Vallance, who grasps the whole state of affairs, just a little more clearly than does her mistress, herself). And still, Miladi is not pleased. She is too sallow for mauve, too faded for white: in her best days, pink never suited her, save by candle-light. Decidedly, of all the months in the year, November is the most unbecoming. Dear Doctor Herzlieb has explained to her about the actinic action of light. Some chemical peculiarity in the atmosphere must cause the human skin to look as it does to-day. Or can it be that the mirrors of the Hôtel Paradis are made of inferior, horribly unflattering glass?

At last she plucks up heart enough to try on a delicate cream-coloured sac ; one of Worth's latest achievements, and cut, line for line, so the artist declares, from a genuine Pompadour, historically vouched for, and now in the possession of one of the noblest families of France.

Surely if panacea could be found for a stricken spirit, it must be here—a dress made line for line, plait for plait, after an historically vouched-for Pompadour ! And one consolation brings about another. By the time the sac is adjusted, the coiffure must be changed ; and then, there are adjuncts of ribbons and laces ; and then, a touch—" well, if you insist upon it, Valance, a touch of rouge, just to conceal the ravages of tears from my poor boy." Finally, by ten o'clock, Lady Austen descends the staircase, pearl-powdered, carmined, be-wigged ; Fifine in her arms ; the usual galimatias on her tongue ; as fearfully and wonderfully Miladi as ever.

She sweeps along the corridors, conscious that even the servants look after

enters.

The Reverend Laurence Biron, white as any spectre, stands beside the hearth.

He comes forward with irresolute steps, with head down-bent.

“Helena,” he utters, in a tone out of which all resemblance to his ordinary voice seems to have vanished. “I am here to ask your forgiveness, to plead for a reconciliation. Am I too late?”





CHAPTER XIX.

A GENUINE POMPADOUR.

ST is ten o'clock when Mr. Biron asks this question—a question upon the solution of which hang the destinies of, at least, four actors in this little drama. At eleven, young Mark, with a quick beating heart, waits in the hall of the Paradis to know if his mother, after more than three years' separation, will "receive" him.

He has sent up his card by one of the hotel waiters. Mistress Vallance—a good quarter of an hour having elapsed—brings down word that Miladi is visible. Mistress Vallance (with a face differently made to the face which nature gave her, jigging,

Austen," into Miladi's presence.

The mother and son shake hands. Lady Austen presents her forehead for Mark's salute—from his earliest infancy Mark was educated to regard his mother's lips and cheeks as fashioned of perishable materials !

Half a minute later, arranging herself, with Fifine, in an attitude, Miladi sinks again into the armchair from which she rose on the entrance of her *enfant chéri* and begins to talk commonplace.

What ! Mark really arrived in Esterel last night, and never came to see her ? Is putting up at one of the small French hotels, with a paved floor, no doubt—oh, those terrible paved floors, in preference to the Paradis ? Well, well, she must not find fault, after his glorious examination. The greatest delight to herself, and to his other amis intimes, though, to be sure, it will involve that cruel climate of India.

Now, was it two thousand nine hundred and fifty or three thousand marks? She read all about it in the papers, at the time, but has such a sad, sad memory for figures! In any case it is a relief to think that that distressing land-surveying, which has ever—with a sigh—been so sharp a cross to her to bear, should be over.

Mark listens in silence, the old pain at his heart, the old, bitter sense of humiliation gaining upon him with each airy sentence Lady Austen utters.

He had hoped, poor lad, to find some substantial change—in his mother's outward woman, at least; some abandonment of paint, perukes, and broken English; some acknowledgment of age; some outward and visible sign that Laurence Biron's reign, and the frivolities that accompanied it, were over.

With his heart crushed by the knowledge that Biron has become his successful rival in Jet's regard, he has still felt, throughout the wretched watches of the night, that there would be balm for him in seeing Lady Austen maintain her changed position

the jealousy which has clouded so many years of his young life.

That she should have invited him to visit her was an omen from which, ere he quitted England, he augured the best—a sign, at all events, when she despatched the message, of her being no longer under Biron's influence. But still

. . . . “Mother,” he begins abruptly, unable longer to bear her commonplace talk, the cruel suspense that tortures him, “I see, a good deal to my surprise, that Mr. Laurence Biron is in Esterel.”

“Yes,” answers Miladi, calmly arranging a rebellious frilling of her Pompadour robe. “Laurence Biron is staying just at present at the Hôtel Paradis.”

“I passed this way last night, at an hour when I could not think of disturbing you, and saw him. He was sitting opposite Miss Jet Conyngham at dinner.”

— — —

“Indeed!”

If Mark believed this sudden home-thrust would bring about a crisis, he was mistaken. No shadow of embarrassment crosses Lady Austen’s face. She meets her son’s eyes with steady coolness.

“I was so tired after my journey, and Fifine, too—n’est-ce pas, ma charmante—that we could not dine in public. I had not got Fifine in your day, surely, Mark? No, it must have been Napoleon, poor sweet pet! I don’t know whether I ever wrote you the particulars of Napoleon’s tragic ending?”

Mark rises hastily. He walks to and fro about the room, his hands clasped behind him, an “Austen look” that Miladi should know about his face.

“Of course, I have no wish to open unpleasant discussions, mother. When I came here I hoped, from my soul, that the name of Laurence Biron would not be spoken between us. Your invitation made me believe that a new leaf had been turned, at last. Am I mistaken?”

dare say I could give you an answer."

"I mean a new leaf with regard to Mr. Biron. Do we still reckon him upon our list of acquaintance, or do we not?"

"Laurence Biron upon our list of acquaintance, child? I protest I do not know what you are driving at," says Miladi, innocently. "Laurence was in this room not a quarter of an hour ago, talking over the results of your examination, and as pleased"—Lady Austen raises a morsel of perfumed lace to her eyes—"as pleased as your own dear papa could have been at the improvement in your prospects."

Up springs the angry blood into Mark's face.

"If I had known this sooner!" he exclaims with sudden passion. "By Heaven, if I had known I was to find that fellow under the same roof with you, the expense of my journey to Esterel might have been spared."

"Expense," repeats Miladi, in what she would fain render a soothing tone. "Really, Mark, you are impayable. What can expense, the price of a railway ticket, of half a dozen hotel bills, matter?"

"It matters a great deal to me," is Mark's answer. "You cannot suppose, mother, that my examination, from first to last, has cost me nothing? I am in debt more than fifty pounds at this moment."

"Fifty pounds—the price of a dress, of a bijou! How many fifty pounds have I not thrown away this year? Ah, if you knew the pleasure it would be to me to help you, Mark, you would not be so stiff-necked—I can call your perversity by no milder name—on the score of money."

Honest tears are in Miladi's eyes (tears, I need scarcely add, kept, carefully, on the safe side of overflowing). No man or woman exists with character absolutely unleavened by good. Lady Austen's one virtue is a certain constitutional open-handedness that makes it easier for her, in every relation of life, to give than to withhold.

unforgiving—oh, I know the faults of my disposition well enough, and I know the foundation-stone upon which they rest—jealousy. Money! Why, from the time I was a schoolboy, it would have been sweeter to me, any day, to starve—you hear me, mother, to starve, than to take money from you. Why?"

Lady Austen's eyelids droop. She murmurs something, in a plaintive voice, about letting bygones be bygones.

"With all my heart, when they *are* bygones," exclaims Mark. "It was in the hope that the past was over and done with, that, at length, you would look upon me with undivided affection, that I came here. I was warranted in my hopes by your last letter."

"That letter was written in a moment of painful annoyance," interrupts Lady Austen. "The past fortnight has been the most try-

ing ordeal I have gone through since your poor dear papa's death."

Mark, on this second allusion to his father, moves away. He stands looking at her coldly.

" You must remember, child, I have been quite alone of late. Florence is so desperately empty . . . and nothing shatters my nerves like solitude. I believe a life of solitude would drive me out of my senses, I do indeed. I am not as young as I once was, Mark ? "

A certain pathetic tone supplies the note of interrogation with which this truism ends. But Mark is in no humour to supply the sweet unction of flattery that Miladi's soul yearns for.

" And I care less and less for the empty pleasures of the world. I require épanchements de cœur (*Fifine, mon idole, ma bibiche, les mouches seront ta ruine !*). Companionship for the heart as well as the intellect. Where—where, among the gilded crowds of fashion, shall we find this ? "

" You are taking me out of my depths,"

.....

He laughs, joylessly enough. The old hopeless want of sympathy has but strengthened, the lad feels, by absence; the impassable gulf yawns, wider than ever, between his mother and himself.

"If you really desire a quieter life, if you are weary of Florence and its dissipations," he goes on, presently, "why not make your home for awhile with me? I shall have to pass two years under a practical engineer before I start for India. In some quiet German town——"

Lady Austen holds up both her hands with a little deprecatory scream. The action may be theatrical; the sentiment of horror that inspires it is real.

"A German town—German climate, German coffee-parties, for me, a child of the south, accustomed to sunshine, blue skies, a life of emotion, Art! No, caro mio. I have spent the best half of my existence

in Italy. I shall remain there," says Miladi, not without a tremor in her voice, "until I die."

Mark looks at her fixedly.

"I had hoped," he remarks after a few seconds' silence—"I had hoped, under present altered circumstances, that you might like the change for a year, for a few months, at least, of being my companion."

"What do you mean by 'present altered circumstances'?" cries Miladi, her eye kindling.

"Surely you do not want me to tell you in plainer terms?"

"I do indeed. I dislike imbroglios, sous-entendus, geheimnisskrämerei, of any kind."

"I mean Laurence Biron's engagement. After his marriage Mr. Biron can scarcely play the part of Greek chorus in our lives that he has played during the past six years."

Lady Austen raises her head with all the dignity that a genuine Pompadour (peruke, laces, and ribbons to match) can yield. She looks up stonily into her son's face.

You are talking to me in an unknown language, Mark."

"I thought no language was unknown to you, mother," cries Mark, with rising choler. "But perhaps you have lived too long away from England to understand plain English words, or thoughts, or feelings. Laurence Biron was engaged five days ago to Miss Jet Conyngham. She is spoken of openly in Esterel as his affianced wife. Thus much is certain."

"Is it indeed, child? Then I can tell you, 'for certain,' with permission to cite me as your authority, that Laurence Biron is not engaged to Miss Jet Conyngham, and has no intention, under any circumstances whatever, of making her his wife. You hear me?"

"I do," answers Mark, his face whitening with passion; "I hear, and I believe I understand. If my suspicion is true," he adds, with bitter meaning, "if Laurence

Biron, influenced by I care not whom, has played false to the best and noblest woman living, he is a greater scoundrel than even I have taken him for."

"And pray what business is it of yours, figlio mio? What do you know of this best and noblest woman to call forth such a tantamarre of indignation? The whole story is of every-day occurrence.

“‘Ein Jüngling liebt ein Mädchen.
Die hatt’ einen andern erwählt.
Der andre liebt eine andre !’

Wait till this afternoon,” goes on Miladi, unconcernedly. “Come to a little ‘tertullia’ I shall have at five o’clock to-day, and you will meet Miss Jet Conyngham and Laurence Biron together, *as my guests.*”

To this invitation Mark vouchsafes no answer; and, ere Lady Austen has had time to repeat it, a step is heard outside in the passage; the door opens.

“I may come in?” asks a voice, whose unforgotten, half-airy, half-commanding ring sends the blood boiling through Mark

part he plays, with hand outheld, in token of friendly greeting, the Rev. Laurence Biron walks across the room.

Mark folds his arms upon his breast, and, ignoring the proffered hand, looks Laurence Biron steadfastly between the eyes.

"We—we were just in the middle of a little discussion," cries Miladi; her flushed cheeks, her set lips, belying the playfulness of her tone. "Don't you remember, Laurence, you used to declare you never came upon Mark and me, alone, without finding us in the thick of an Austen controversy?"

"A controversy—with absent friends for its subject?" says Laurence Biron, gradually withdrawing the hand that Mark refuses to receive. "'Les absents,' as I know to my cost, 'ont toujours tort.' You were not discussing my merits, now, I hope, Mark?"

"I was not, sir," answers Mark Austen,

with stern emphasis. "On the contrary, I was speaking, as you entered, of the person I esteem most in the world—of Miss Jet Conyngham."

Miladi starts, with an exclamation of fury, to her feet.



CHAPTER XX.

NOVEMBER VIOLETS.

“ ‘EALOUSY is the ugliest vice by which a woman can be deformed. If it is impossible for love to exist undisfigured by it, I, for one, would sooner exist without love.’ Those are Mr. Biron’s doctrines, so solemnly enunciated by him last night that I vowed no Rose Pinson, no Miladi, should ever put me off my moral balance again. And still —still, Cora,” says Jet, with one of her rapid transitions from gay to grave, “it needs but an afternoon’s absence to bring back the ugly vice in fullest force. Everything will be set right half an hour hence,” she adds, a little tremulously. “We shall

see Laurence at Lady Austen's party, and a word from him will be more than sufficient explanation of his conduct. But to-day, for ever, must be a day lost! Nothing can make up for the happy hours we might have had since this morning."

The November twilight is closing fast; already a glaring flood of gas streams forth, preparatory to the "tertullia," from Lady Austen's salon on the first floor of the Paradis. The invalids are safe within doors; the more valid gossipers loitering, as usual, under the portico of the Hôtel Paradis. Jet and Cora Conyngham, alone, pace up and down the upper terrace of the garden, the palm-shaded terrace, where Jet watched the Ixora during its one short night of fragrant perfection, and marvelled whether her own happiness were destined to be as transitory, as frail!

"Every joy we possess is insecure. I have been reading that observation in books and hearing it in sermons all my life. It never had much meaning for me till to-day. Insecure . . . Why, I dare say

anything so ridiculously unlikely were to happen as Adolphus marrying any one but you, what should you do?"

Cora has to stop in her walk and meditate. At last, drawing a wild cheque on her imagination, "I—I do not suppose I should like it, just at first, Jet," she answers, with an air of conviction.

"Like it! Well, no, I never imagined that you would. What should you *do*, eventually? Would you be able to live life out, do you think, or would it kill you?"

"It would not kill me, I am sure."

"And you would grow to be cheerful again? In time, perhaps, marry some one else, yourself?"

"Most likely. If Adolphus had another wife, I certainly could not marry him."

"I wish I were you, little Cora! I wish I had your temperament. For me," says

Jet, her voice sinking, “everything must be in extremes—violent happiness, or pain too keen to be endured. To-day, even, with no better excuse for my folly than that Laurence, through some accident, has not come near us, I have suffered—horribly.”

And, in truth, the girl’s cheeks are wan; lines that her nineteen years do not warrant seem, in the last twenty-four hours, to have become graven round her mouth.

“Laurence Biron is a vast deal too much under a certain bad influence, Jet. I felt it, the first moment I saw him, with Miladi’s lap-dog in his arms. If I were you I should make him break off that little friendship of his without delay. Just see how ‘his Reverence and Miladi,’ how we all, are talked about in this hotel! Why, Lady Austen’s maid told Porter, and Porter told me——”

“Something that you are dying to repeat, in your turn. Relieve your mind, child,” says Jet, with forced coolness. “Lighten your conscience by repeating the last

—prepare for something desperately unflattering—that you have been mistaken for me.”

“Cora!”

“Of course, taken by itself, this matters nothing; still, it is as well, perhaps, that you should know of it. ‘Miss Conyngham, the heiress.’ That is the title the English people in Esterel have given you.”

“Brevet rank for once in my life,” cries Jet; but with a quivering lip. Some unacknowledged presage of evil, some dread, as yet foundationless, is gaining mastery in her brain. Her look is restless; her colour goes from white to red with suspicious quickness.

“And Lady Austen was under the same impression as the rest, until Major Brett undeceived her.”

“That terrible Major Brett! If I were superstitious I should believe him to be my

evil genius, my grave-goose, as we used to say when we were children. The very sight of the amethyst brooch, the wig, the teeth, makes me shudder."

"And yet, Major Brett may have been a truer friend than you think."

"Cora, these oracular utterances are too much for human nerves. Tell me the worst secrets of Porter's prison-house, and let us have done with it."

"The worst secrets are . . . about Mark. The poor fellow visited his mother, for the first time, this morning, and there was a frightfully violent explanation between them all—Lady Austen, Mark, and Mr. Biron."

"An explanation that can in no possible way concern us," says Jet, a little coldly. "There is nothing new in Mark and Laurence disliking each other—some groundless jealousy, no doubt, standing over from Mark's schoolboy days. Laurence, I am certain, has been generously doing his best to bring the mother and son together, and—"

"And has succeeded in setting them

tions to all Esterel for her ‘tertullia,’ then spent the afternoon alone, with Mr. Laurence Biron, in her own apartments.”

Whiter and whiter grows Jet’s face; more and more have youth and brightness died from it.

“It is an intimacy that I do not like—how can I like it?” says the poor child very low. “But I believe, utterly, in Laurence Biron’s good faith. It would take a great deal more than appearances, a great deal more than idle gossip, to shake me in my belief. As to Lady Austen’s quarrel with Mark, it may have been about family matters—money—a hundred things of which we are ignorant——”

“And if I know more than I have told you,” says Cora, taking her sister’s cold hand, and holding it, wistfully, between her own—“if I know that your name——”

“We have no right to know anything,

whatever," interrupts Jet, with determination. "I have a good strong pair of shoulders, and must bear whatever burthen falls on me. No need to go out and meet ill fortune on its road. Half-past four already!" Just at this moment the old church clock of Esterel strikes the hour. "I must gather some violets for Laurence's button-hole—yes, Cora, though I should have to give them to him under Lady Austen's very eyes. Did you ever see such November violets?" she adds, hiding her face from Cora's scrutiny, as she bends, under shadow of the palms. "Talk of sweetness—why, they are sweeter than all the wild flowers of all the Devonshire Aprils put together."



CHAPTER XXI.

THE LAST FIVE MINUTES.

HE keeps up her spirits bravely; half an hour later, enters Lady Austen's salon with a step as firm, with head as well erect, as her wont. Only Cora, and perhaps one other observer, can detect that the bloom on her cheek is feverish, that her eyes are over-lustrous. Miladi, who comes forward, with exaggerated cordiality, to receive the sisters, is lavish of pretty speeches.

“ Quite a pleasure to have my little assemblage ornamented with so much beauty. I did my best to make my son, Mark, prolong his stay in Esterel, especially when I heard he was a friend of Miss Jet



Conyngham's, but all in vain. Perhaps he showed discretion, acted wisely for his own *peace of mind*, in cutting his visit short. What do you say, young ladies? Now, I hope you will find yourselves among friends, Miss Wylie, Major Brett," indicating her visitors with successive waves of her hand. "I always say that at my little receptions, my tertullias, as I call them, introductions are needless. All present are friends of mine, and friends, I hope, of each other."

Miladi is gorgeous, I had almost written satanic, in a robe of black and flame-coloured satin; a Parisian confection, no doubt of the highest price and novelty, but grotesquely unsuited to the woman and the occasion. All the flower-shops of Esterel have been ransacked to furnish forth adornment for her salon; not tea only, but wine, ices, fruits, are being handed round by white-gloved waiters to the assembled guests. The gas is lighted; brackets and tables are weighed down by the "bigotry and virtue," the gilt bottles, ivory carvings, photograph-stands, without which Miladi never travels. Every-

term, are wanting.

And the Reverend Laurence Biron ?

Jet's eyes, in one quick glance, take in each occupant of the room, and for an instant—shall I say of fear or of hope?—she believes him to be absent ! Then, in a farther corner, speaking to no one, a newspaper in his hand, she descries him, dressed, as she has never seen him, in a suit of ultra-clericals—a coat, of cut ritualistic, reaching to his heels, a turned-down lawn collar, a pair of lavender black-stitched gloves.

This is his livery, put on by Lady Austen's command ; livery that he wears only when her influence is in the ascendant.

Laurence Biron, to say the worst of him, belongs not to the class of amateur or unpaid impostors. Give Biron five hundred pounds a year, and see if he would seek to hide his spiritual deficiencies under a long-skirted coat or down-turned shirt-collar

more ! Wherever his eclecticism may have landed him, it is a long way beyond the point at which we voluntarily assume faith, or symbols of faith, that we have not. He *knows* that he believes nothing, venerates nothing, hopes nothing ; no, not even the final triumph of good in human hearts.

For what, save the solid inducement of pounds, shillings, and pence, should such a man play the hypocrite ?

Life is a burlesque. This, if circumstances allowed him to speak frankly, would pretty fairly summarise Mr. Biron's creed. We are ignorant from whence we come, or whither we go, or what is the object of our existence. Such being our condition, enthusiasm on any subject, or of any kind or degree, can only be regarded as the outcome of a diseased brain. Wisdom consists in accepting whatever material good lies to our hand—art, literature, the love of woman, the beauty of nature, the excitement of baccarat—in putting aside every question that does not admit of definite answer, in taking care of the digestion, and, finally,

pounds a year, make him easy as to his breakfast, his dinner, and his tailor's bills, and he would, in words, confess his creed of base prudence, cynical worldliness, and low content, as plainly as he confesses it now, in actions.

. . . . Alas, that five hundred pounds a year is hypothetical ! His hopes of possessing fortune and (small item) Jet's heart are in the dust. A marriage with Lady Austen is once more the open door between himself and starvation ; the necessity of wearing his livery more stringent than ever.

Miladi, good creature, is not particularly well versed in the finer subtleties of unbelief ; troubles not her head as to whether the Reverend Laurence Biron be positivist, agnostic, eclectic. It is her will that he shall wear the garb clerical, just as in former days it was her will that Sir George Austen, on all possible, or impossible, occasions, should wear his general's uniform. It makes him Somebody.

To belong to the army or Church is, of itself, a passport, Miladi will say. Into what society can an officer or a clergyman not gain admission? A scarlet coat, a white tie, are letters of credit. As well drop the prefix—how gladly would Biron, long ere this, have dropped his!—that attaches a certain social standing to your name.

Accordingly, on this day from which his new, rehabilitated life is definitely to commence, this day on which, as regards freedom, Mr. Biron's last dying speech and confession has been made, it is her pleasure that he should, in all literalness, be Reverend down to the ground. A curious set-off or relief, had Miladi the sense of humour to perceive it, to the Cimmerian flame-colour of her own costume.

“Really, the most ludicrously ill-assorted couple,” remarks Miss Wylie, behind shelter of her fan, to Major Brett. “Miladi must have gone in that dress to a masked ball as the Inquisition.”

“With Biron as high-priest. Ah, young

"—earnest," Miss Wylie hazards, ingenuously. "It would be a relief to one's conscience to know things stood on a correct footing, at last."

"Correct, and more than correct," says the old major, rubbing his hands. "The marriage of his Reverence and Miladi is to take place, at Florence, before Christmas. I have it from the highest source, from Lady Austen's own lips."

"And Miss Jet Conyngham?"

"Ah, a trifling misconception as to ways and means; the forty thousand charms of her sister assigned, by the lying jade, Rumour, to Miss Jet, herself. From the first, if you recollect, I had my fears that some mistake of the kind was likely to occur."

"Poor thing, poor thing! With all her faults, one cannot refrain from feeling a certain——"

"Spare yourself the trouble of commisera-
tion, my dear madam; it is unneeded.
Handsome girls may die, and worms may
eat them, but not of love—not, at all
events," adds the old major, cynically, "in
the present age of the world. A good-
looking face, more or less, in Araminta's
photograph album; an experience practi-
cally made use of to give pathos to the
'little new song that she sings,' and then
. . . . consolation in the shape of some
gentleman, bound up with the great Eating
Interest out of the City. That is how
young ladies of the nineteenth century get
over their love-sorrows."

Thus, Major Brett and Miss Wylie.

Upon the other side of the room, the
Marie Stuart widow murmurs her little
plausible confidences into the ear of Mr.
Conyngham.

"It is but hearsay, I am told, at present,
and, indeed, one should not waste one's
sympathies on mere temporal things, still
it is a matter of relief to think that this
Lady Austen" (*this* Lady Austen, whose

Laurence Biron," repeats Mr. Conyngham, with his usual blank want of interest in any affairs save his own. "I had supposed them to be married, or engaged—it comes to the same—for years past. 'Lady Austen . . . Mr. Biron . . .' It seems to me the two names have invariably been entered together in my note-book."

"Y—es. That is the very sad part of the history. Ah, my dear friend, what a pang it costs one to reflect that a person like Mr. Laurence Biron should be a lawful minister of the Truth."

"Biron is a most desirable travelling companion," says Mr. Conyngham, almost with warmth. "We came down with him from Avignon, and his attentions were of real service to me. You see, I had taken a slight cold at Lyons——"

"Ah, those slight colds!" ejaculates the widow, piously sympathetic.

"Perugino had not, at that time, learnt

his duties, and Jet, poor child, is scarcely reliable in the matter of packing."

"Jet is thoughtless; Jet has been deprived, alas! too early of maternal care." The widow glances with meaning at the window beside which the girl stands, flushed, and smiling. Laurence Biron in the act of crossing the room towards her. "We must hope that with time and training her levity will tone down."

"And, but for Mr. Biron, I should, infallibly, have got my feet damp at Marseilles. There is an uncovered platform, if you recollect, that one must traverse in changing carriages. We had had a slight shower of rain in the course of the forenoon, and my galoshes were packed away. It was a moment of great distress for us all. Happily, Biron had the presence of mind to think of a chaise à porteurs, and procured one for me That laid the foundation of my good opinion of him."

"Indeed. I consider the Reverend Laurence Biron a very dangerously fascinating person, Mr. Conyngham."

tion. As it is, with every care, and, up to the present time, favourable weather, I am *not* progressing. Since I left England, last October, I have lost exactly seven ounces and a fraction."

The widow abandons the subject of Jet's levity, in despair.

Levity. If human creatures, the self-elected salt of the earth, more especially, could look into the hearts of others, now and then, would it turn them into Christians, I wonder ?

Jet Conyngham's heart is frozen. With no tangible confirmation of her fears, she feels that her worst fears are becoming realised ; that Biron's love—that Biron, himself—is gone from her ! She reads the sinister truth in every loud laugh of Lady Austen's, in every whisper exchanged round the room ; reads it on Laurence Biron's changed and haggard face.

He approaches—what choice has he but to approach her? They shake hands. Cora, invaluable always at commonplace, makes some observation about the weather.

“Yes,” remarks Jet, in a forced kind of voice, but calmly enough: “it would have been a fine day for exploring the forests—if we had had an escort. Protected, or unprotected, I shall certainly take Cora over to Tamaris to-morrow.”

“If you knew how my day has been spent you would forgive me,” says Biron, bending over her. Then he adds, in a lower key, “Forgive, and pity me.”

“Have I anything real to forgive?” Jet whispers, looking up at him with eager beseeching, with a lifetime’s condensed pain in her deep eyes.

“Anything real? Oh, my poor little love! You have to forgive me everything, Jet—forgive, and, if you are wise, forget me.”

Cora, by now, has moved aside. The lovers for five minutes’ space—with a roomful of people, with Lady Austen, herself, looking on—are alone.

am shipwrecked."

Biron's face is white with genuine passion; the muscles round his mouth quiver convulsively.

"From the first day I saw you," he goes on in a broken whisper, "I have been led away from—from my allegiance. I had a hope . . . in the generosity of others, in the possibility of my regaining freedom—and the hope has proved a false one. I—I—"

"Have ceased to care for me," she utters unfalteringly, with rigid lips. "I understand now what you told me that evening on the terrace. The Ixora was your favourite flower, you said, because of its short life. There was no time to grow tired of it! Yes; I understand now."

Her voice, her quiet words, cut Laurence Biron to the quick.

Much experience has rendered him proof against scenes, reproaches, tears, hysterical

demonstration, of all kinds. Jet Conyng-ham's cold despair, the promise of future anguish on her young face, touch every lingering fibre of manhood that exists in him.

"Ceased to care for you! I shall love you till the last hour I draw breath," he whispers hoarsely. "There will be my punishment. Do you think a wretch, expiating his sins in hell, could forget that he had once seen heaven's gates ajar? Do you think I shall not look back, out of my infernal life, to your sweet face, feel your poor little hand, touch your lips, in dreams?"

"I think," she answers, still with perfect self-command, "that I would far rather not hear you talk like this. Our whole acquaintance has been a mistake. I have never rightly known you—nor you me, sir, for the matter of that! But nothing that is done can be undone. Spoilt, or not spoilt, we must just live our lives out, to the end. Do you know, I have brought you some violets?" she goes on quickly. "I

She loosens the violets from her dress and gives them to him.

Laurence Biron lifts them, with a gesture unseen by all save Jet, to his lips.

They are warm from her touch; pure, fragrant, as the girlish love that she has lavished on him.

"Afraid! You have a right to talk of fear. You do well to remind me that I am the most abject coward on the face of the earth. But I shall have my punishment—no room for doubt on that head! I shall have my punishment."

"I hope you will have happiness," says Jet, softly, solemnly. "If others"—she cannot bring herself to speak Lady Austen's name—"have a claim on you, stronger than mine, it is right, it is to your honour, to give me up. You deserve no punishment."

Right, honour. As Jet pronounces those words, her face like death, a piteous light

shining in her eyes, Mr. Biron gains practical knowledge as to whether conscience—the deposit left in the crucible of experiment—be a myth or a reality.

When the last of the guests has departed, Lady Austen crosses the room to her lover's side.

He has opened one of the windows, and stands there, with face outbent to the chill, evening wind.

"Just the way to catch a violent cold," remarks Miladi, affectionately. "Really, Laurence, I must make you take better care of yourself."

"The room wants air," he answers, shortly; "impossible to breathe in such a stifling atmosphere."

She pauses for a moment or two, watching his expression narrowly.

"I have misgivings as to the climate of Esterel agreeing with you, mon ami. You are positively saffron-coloured, to-day: don't you think it would be well, *for your health's sake*, to go on to Florence, at once?"

about. If we decide on spending the winter at Florence, we cannot do better than secure the Villa Corona. And there are your money matters at Nice. I do not choose that you should leave your debts of honour unpaid."

Honour. He seems fated to hear the word to-night; spoken by what different lips, with what different signification!

"Decide everything as you like, Helena. All places are the same to me."

He turns, now, and she can see the horrible weariness of his face; can see, too, the bunch of November violets, Jet's gift, in his button-hole.

In a second, ere he can divine, or frustrate her intentions, the violets are in Lady Austen's hands, are shred to fragments, flung forth into the darkness.

"So much for Miss Jet Conyngham's love-token!" she exclaims. "Do you

think I have no eyes, mon cher? Do you think all the touching little farewell scene was lost upon me?"

"I think," says Biron, moving away from her with cold disgust, "that there is one subject it would be wise for you not to broach, one name that had best never be mentioned between us."

"And I," says Miladi, harshly, "see no reason, whatever, for such delicate reticence. In every game, one must win, one lose. Miss Jet Conynghan has chosen to dream a dream. She must bear the awakening from it, as best she can."



CHAPTER XXII.

JET IS SILENT.

READER, the story I have told is a thing of the past. Five years have fled since Jet Conyngham watched the sunset among the forests at Laurence Biron's side. The girl, keenly expectant of life's drama, and of the part that she should play therein, is now a woman ; beautiful—though not with the brilliant colouring, the vivid expression, of her first youth—quiet, self-contained.

“The cold Miss Conyngham.” Such is the epithet that the world, indiscriminative between coldness and reserve, has found for her. “Ole Aunt Det.” That is the name by which she best likes to hear herself

called ; the name that she has, already, taught Cora's baby-children to lisp.

. . . . Spoilt, or not spoilt, we must just live our lives out to the end. . . .

Crucial has been the test put to Jet's philosophy, doubtful, at times, the final issue of the struggle.

At first, the people nearest to the girl judged it wise, after the manner of friends, to put her through a course of tonic or heroic treatment. She had squandered her love—rather, say, her childish fancy, upon an unprincipled fortune-hunter, a disgrace to his cloth, a man whose heartless selfishness was unredeemed by one solitary virtue. Look to what Mr. Biron had sunk as Lady Austen's husband. (And, indeed, the married life of his Reverence and Miladi might furnish an adequate text to many a sermon!) Was it worthy of her to mourn, lastingly, for object so worthless ? Time, that in the highest natures has been known to heal nobly-gotten wounds—was time never to skin over the scratch that, during a fortnight's madness, had befallen her ? And

her regret were pretty much the same as they had been at first ; crushed down out of sight, of course—can men and women walk about the world's highway with shrieks and tears ?—but ready to start, at any chance reminder, a flower, a song, the smell of fir-woods in autumn, to the surface.

Five years. Jet Conyngham is now four and twenty ; a confirmed old maid, she says, herself, in all sincerity. Her summers she spends at Dulford Rectory ; her winters, abroad, with her father. For Mr. Conyngham is as great a valetudinarian, though as little likely to die, as on the day when we first saw him at Folkestone. Since that luckless southern November, she has received more admiration than falls to the lot of ninety-nine young and happy girls out of a hundred, has read much, thought much ; seen many men, many countries ; talks brilliantly ; is a perfectly charming companion to young or old. And still——

—Still the world calls her “the cold Miss Conyngham,” and before you have been in her society five minutes you feel the appropriateness of the title.

With all her grace of language, her knowledge of life, her ready sympathy in the concerns of others, Jet’s brightness strikes you as unreal. The old heart-whole laugh, the dancing step, the enjoyment that once lit up every feature of her mobile face, are gone from her, for ever.

“In fact, Mark, I am old—yes, a great deal older than papa and Aunt Gwendoline. They can take an interest, both of them, in things that I have outlived a century ago, and as to you—you remember Edgar Poe’s description of the youth who insisted upon being in love with his great-grandmother? The situation is ridiculous enough in a story-book. Think what it would be, transferred to real life.”

It is a fair August afternoon, and Jet Conyngham is walking in the woods that lie around Dulford Rectory, Mark Austen at her side; Mark, home, on a six months’

incapable than he was, five years ago, of receiving Jet's "No" as final.

All the world of woodland creatures round them is wrapt in peaceful happiness. Legions of rooks are talking to each other in the elms; the squirrels are starting to and fro, among the branches; the bees hum in the tall foxgloves. In the middle-distance lies the placid picture of Dulford Rectory. A stationary, white spot, on the lawn, represents the rector's wife; three smaller white spots, in perpetual motion, represent the rector's children. At an open library window may be seen a slight black figure and a writing-table; Adolphus, no doubt, busied over the sermon which, next Sunday, shall furnish forth the accustomed eight days' nourishment to the intelligence of Dulford parish.

"The worst of it is, I do not care, one bit, about being ridiculous," says Mark; deep, resolute has grown his voice since

last we heard its tones. "The sense of humour must be wanting in my character, at all events, as regards myself. How many years, I wonder, have you been laughing at me, Jet?"

Jet. They have at least progressed to the use of Christian names!

"Six—seven? Yes, you have been laughing at me exactly seven years, and I mind it rather less than I did at the first Dulford tea-party when I ever met you. Do you remember the archery-ball, talking of festivities? The ball at which you not only gave my cotillon to the colonel of the regiment, but defended your conduct afterwards, as based on principle? You wore a blue muslin gown, Miss Conyngham. By the end of the evening it was torn to shreds by the spurs of your successive partners, and I picked up a rejected fragment—laugh at me as much as you like—and kept it. That morsel of blue rag has been to India and back with me."

But Jet is not laughing. She has turned her face away, sharply. In the matter of

yet?

"You are a great deal too honest, too true," so, after a minute, she tells him, "to waste your youth, as you are doing, on a dream. To all intents and purposes, I am an old woman. 'Ole Aunt Det,' Cora's little daughters call me. For *you*, the best part of existence is still to come."

"The best part—if you choose to make it so!"

"Even travelling, the one thing that used to rouse me out of myself, is growing insipid. I was telling Cora, this morning, that I would spend next winter with them, here, at Dulford. Perugino suits papa to perfection—I am never, really, wanted on the journeys—and hotels, new acquaintance, table d'hôtes, and the rest of it do not amuse me. I must look out for a fresh occupation for my old age—write a novel, perhaps——"

"A novel, of which the scene shall be laid in India," says Mark, promptly. "You could not do better."

For a few seconds Jet pauses. Then she rests her hand upon his arm—the slender, sunburnt hand whose touch, now, as in the olden times, can bring Mark Austen so near heaven. She looks up seriously, candidly, in his face.

"A day or two ago, dear Mark, you asked me a question, and I told you I must have time before I could give you a final answer. I have taken time, and——"

"Your answer, whatever it is, cannot be final," he interrupts. "As long as human beings draw breath they change. The word 'final' is an absurdity."

"Well, we will not quarrel about that. Mark, if I cared for you less, I think, perhaps, my answer might be—yes."

A flush of quick emotion sweeps over Mark's face.

"But as it is, looking upon you, liking you, as my best friend on earth, I shrink from the barest possibility of your unhappiness."

have been here, there come such good bright days that I feel like a girl once more. And then . . . then, O Mark, in a moment the old anguish rushes back ! - The old anguish, the old despair of life." Her cheek has grown white as marble while she speaks. " And I feel that it will be—ah, any number of years, before I am cured, really."

" And suppose I am willing to wait—any number of years ? " persists Mark Austen.

Jet is silent.



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